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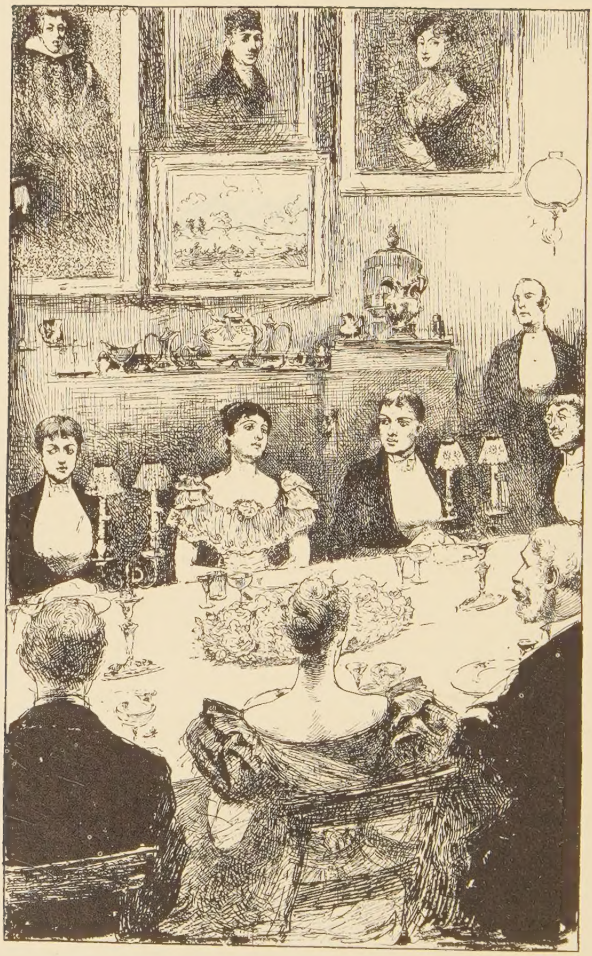

"She was very white as she turned her face to him."—Vol. II., p. 314.

KATHARINE LAUDERDALE

BY

F. MARION CRAWFORD

AUTHOR OF "SARACINESCA," "PIETRO GHISLERI," ETC.

VOL. II

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALFRED BRENNAN

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KATHARINE LAUDERDALE.

CHAPTER XVI.

KATHARINE let Ralston accompany her within a block of Robert Lauderdale's house and then sent him away.

"It's getting late," she said. "It must be nearly ten o'clock, isn't it? Yes. People are all going out at this hour in the morning, and it's of no especial use to be seen about together. There's the Assembly ball to-night, and of course you'll come and talk to me, but I shall see you — or no — I'll write you a note, with a special delivery stamp, and post it at the District Post-Office. You'll get it in less than an hour, and then you'll know what uncle Robert says."

"I know already what he'll say," answered Ralston. "But why mayn't I wait for you here?"

"Now, Jack! Don't be so ridiculously hopeless about things. And I don't want you to wait, for I haven't the least idea how long it may last, and as I said, there's no object in our being seen to meet,

away up here by the Park, at this hour. Good-bye."

"I hate to leave you," said Ralston, holding out one hand, with a resigned air, and raising his hat with the other.

"I like that in you!" exclaimed Katharine, noticing the action. "I like you to take off your hat to me just the same — though you are my husband." She looked at him a moment. "I'm so glad we've done it!" she added with much emphasis, and a faint colour rose in her face.

Then she turned away and walked quickly in the direction of Robert Lauderdale's house, which was at the next corner. As she went she glanced at the big polished windows which face the Park, to see whether any one had noticed her. She knew the people who lived in one of the houses, and she had an idea that others might know her by sight, as the niece of the great man who had built the whole block. But there were only two children at one of the windows, flattening their rosy faces against the pane and drumming on it with fat hands; very smartly dressed children, with bright eyes and gayly-coloured ribbons.

As Katharine had expected, Robert Lauderdale was at home, had finished his breakfast and was in his library attending to his morning letters. She was ushered in almost immediately, and as she entered the room the rich man's secretary stood aside

"'I'm glad to see you, my dear child!' he said warmly."—Vol. II., p. 3.

to let her pass through the door and then went out — a quiet, faultlessly dressed young man who had the air of a gentleman. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles, which looked oddly on his young face.

Robert Lauderdale did not rise to meet Katharine, as he sat sideways by a broad table, in an easy position, with one leg crossed over the other and leaning back in his deep chair. But a bright smile came into his cheerful old face, and stretching out one long arm he took her hand and drew her down and gave her a hearty kiss. Still holding her by the hand, he made her sit in the chair beside him, left vacant by the secretary.

"I'm glad to see you, my dear child!" he said warmly. "What brings you so early?"

He was a big old man and was dressed in a rough tweed of a light colour, which was very becoming to his fresh complexion. His thick hair had once been red, but had turned to a bright sandy grey, something like the sands at Newport. His face was laid out in broad surfaces, rich in healthy colour and deeply freckled where the skin was white. His keen blue eyes were small, but very clear and honest, and the eyebrows were red still, and bushy, with a few white hairs. Two deep, clean furrows extended from beside the nostrils into the carefully brushed beard, and there were four wrinkles, and no more, across the broad forehead. No one would have supposed that Robert

Lauderdale was much over sixty, but in reality he was ten years older. His elder brother, the philanthropist, looked almost as though he might have been his father. It was clear that, like many of the Lauderdales, the old man had possessed great physical strength, and that he had preserved his splendid constitutional vitality even in his old age.

Katharine did not answer his question immediately. She was by no means timid, as has been seen, but she felt a little less brave and sure of herself in the presence of the head of her family than when she had been with Ralston a few minutes earlier. She was not aware of the fact that in many ways she dominated the man who was now her husband, and she would very probably not have wished to believe she did; but she was very distinctly conscious that she could never, under any imaginable circumstances, exert any direct influence over her uncle Robert, though she might persuade him to do much for her. He was by nature himself of the dominant tribe, and during forty years he had been accustomed to command with that absolute certainty of being obeyed which few positions insure as completely as very great wealth does. As she looked at him for a moment before speaking, the little opening speech she had framed began to seem absolutely inadequate, and she could not find words wherewith to compose another at such

short notice. Being courageous, however, she did not hesitate long, but characteristically plunged into the very heart of the matter by telling him just what she felt.

"I've done something very unusual, uncle Robert," she began. "And I've come to tell you all about it, and I prepared a speech for you. But it won't do. Somehow, though I'm not a bit afraid of you —" she smiled as she met his eyes — "you seem ever so much bigger and stronger than I thought you were, now that I've got here."

Uncle Robert laughed and patted her hand as it lay on the desk.

"Out with it, child!" he exclaimed. "I suppose you're in trouble, in some way or other, and you want me to help you. Is that it?"

"You must help me," answered Katharine. "Nobody else can. Uncle Robert —" She paused, though a pause was certainly not necessary in order to give the plain statement more force. "I've just been married to Jack Ralston."

"Good — gracious — heavens!"

The old man half rose from his seat as he uttered the words, one by one, in his deep voice. Then he dropped into his chair again and stared at the young girl in downright amazement.

"What in the name of common sense induced you to do such a mad thing?" he asked very quietly, as soon as he had drawn breath.

Katharine had expected that he would be surprised, as was rather natural, and regained her coolness and decision at once.

"We've loved each other ever since we were children," she said, speaking calmly and distinctly. "You know all about it, for I've told you before now just how I felt. Everybody opposed it — even my mother, at last — except you, and you certainly never gave us any encouragement."

"I should think not, indeed!" exclaimed old Lauderdale, shaking his great head and beating a tattoo on the table with his heavy fingers.

"I don't know why not, I'm sure," Katharine answered, with rising energy. "There's no reason in the world why we shouldn't love each other, and it wouldn't make the slightest difference to me if there were. I should love him just the same, and he would love me. He went to my father last year, as you know, and papa treated him outrageously — wanted to forbid him to come to the house, but of course that was absurd. Jack behaved splendidly through it all — even papa had to acknowledge that, though he didn't wish to in the least. And I hoped and hoped, and waited and waited, but things went no better. You know when papa makes up his mind to a thing, no matter how unreasonable it is, one might just as well talk to a stone wall. But I hadn't the smallest intention of being made miserable for the rest of my life, so I persuaded Jack to marry me —"

"I suppose he didn't need much persuasion," observed the old gentleman, angrily.

"You're quite wrong, uncle Robert! He didn't want to do it at all. He had an idea that it wasn't all right — "

"Then why in the world did he do it? Oh, I hate that sort of young fellow, who pretends that he doesn't want to do a thing because he means to do it all the time — and knows perfectly well that it's a low thing to do!"

"I won't let you say that of Jack!" Katharine's grey eyes began to flash. "If you knew how hard it was to persuade him! He only consented at last — and so did the clergyman — because I promised to come and tell you at once — "

"That's just like the young good-for-nothing, too!" muttered the old man. "Besides — how do I know that you're really married? How do I know that you're not — "

"Stop, please! There's the certificate. Please persuade yourself, before you accuse me of telling falsehoods."

Katharine was suddenly very angry, and Robert Lauderdale realized that he had gone too far in his excitement. But he looked at the certificate carefully, then took out his note-book and wrote down the main facts with great care.

"I didn't mean to doubt what you told me, child," he said, while he was writing. "You've

rather startled me with this piece of news. Human life is very uncertain," he added, using the clergyman's own words, "and it may be just as well that there should be a note made of this. Hadn't you better let me keep the certificate itself? It will be quite safe with my papers."

"I wish you would," answered Katharine, after a moment's thought.

The production of the certificate had produced a momentary cessation of hostilities, so to speak, but the old gentleman had by no means said his last word yet, nor Katharine either.

"Go on, my dear," he resumed gravely. "If I'm to know anything, I should know everything, I suppose."

"There's not very much more to tell," Katharine replied. "I repeat that it was all I could do to persuade Jack to take the step. He resisted to the very last —"

"Hm! He seems to have taken an active part in the proceedings in spite of his resistance —"

"Of course he did, after I had persuaded him to. It was up to that point that he resisted — and even after everything was ready — even this morning, when I met him, he told me that I ought not to have come."

"His spirit seems to have been willing to have some sense — but the flesh was weak," observed the old gentleman, without a smile.

"I insist upon taking the whole responsibility," said Katharine. "It was I who proposed it, and it was I who made him do it."

"You're evidently the strong-minded member, my dear."

"In this — yes. I love him, and I made up my mind that it was right to love him and that I would marry him. Now I have."

"It is impossible to make a more direct statement of an unpleasant truth. And now that you've done it, you mean that your family shall take the consequences — which shows a strong sense of that responsibility you mentioned — and so you've come to me. Why didn't you come to me yesterday? It would have been far more sensible."

"I did think of coming yesterday afternoon — and then it rained, and Charlotte came — "

"Yes — it rained — I remember." Robert Lauderdale's mouth quivered, as though he should have liked to smile at the utter insignificance of the shower as compared with the importance of Katharine's action. "You might have taken a cab. There's a stand close by your house, at the Brevoort."

"Oh, yes — of course — though I should have had to ask mamma for some money, and that would have been very awkward, you know. And if I had really and truly meant to come, I suppose I shouldn't have minded the rain."

"Well — never mind the rain now!" Uncle Robert spoke a little impatiently. "You didn't come — and you've come to-day, when it's too late to do anything — except regret what you've done."

"I don't regret it at all — and I don't intend to," Katharine answered firmly.

"And what do you mean to do in the future? Live with Ralston's mother? Is that your idea?"

"Certainly not. I want you to give Jack something to do, and we'll live together, wherever you make him go — if it's to Alaska."

"Oh — that's it, is it? I begin to understand. I suppose Jack would think it would simplify matters very much if I gave him a hundred thousand dollars, wouldn't he? That would be an even shorter way of giving him the means to support his family."

"Jack wouldn't take money from you," answered Katharine, quickly.

"Wouldn't he? If it were not such a risk, I'd try it, just to convince you. You seem to have a very exalted idea of Jack Ralston, altogether. I've not. Do you know anything about his life?"

"Of course I do. I know how you all talk about the chances you've given him — between you. And I know just what they were — to try his hand at being a lawyer's clerk first, and a banker's clerk afterwards, with no salary and — "

"If he had stuck to either for a year he would

have had a very different sort of chance," interrupted the old gentleman. "I told him so. There was little enough expected of him, I'm sure — just to go to an office every day, as most people do, and write what he was told to write. It wasn't much to ask. Take the whole thing to pieces and look at it. What can he do? What do most men do who must make their way in the world? He has no exceptional talent, so he can't go in for art or literature or that sort of thing. His father wouldn't educate him for the navy, where he would have found his level, or where the Admiral's name would have helped him. He didn't get a technical education, which would have given him a chance to try engineering. There were only two things left — the law or business. I explained all that to him at the time. He shook his head and said he wanted something active. That's just the way all young men talk who merely don't want to stay in-doors and work decently hard, like other people. An active life! What is an active life? Ranching, I suppose he means, and he thinks he should do well on a ranch merely because he can ride fairly well. Riding fairly well doesn't mean much on a ranch. The men out there can all ride better than he ever could, and he knows nothing about horses, nor cattle, nor about anything useful. Besides, with his temper, he'd be shot before he'd been out there a year — "

"But there are all sorts of other things, and you forget Hamilton Bright, who began on a ranch —"

"Ham Bright is made of different stuff. He had been brought up in the country, too, and his father was a Western man — from Cincinnati, at all events, though that isn't West nowadays. No. Jack Ralston could never succeed at that — and I haven't a ranch to give him, and I certainly won't go and buy land out there now. I repeat that his only chance lay in law or business. Law would have done better. He had the advantage of having a degree to begin with, and I would have found him a partner, and there's a lot of law connected with real estate which doesn't need a genius to work it, and which is fairly profitable. But no! He wanted something active! That's exactly what a kitten wants when it runs round after its own tail — and there's about as much sense in it. Upon my word, there is!"

"You're very hard on him, uncle Robert. And I don't think you're quite reasonable. It was a good deal the old Admiral's fault —"

"I'm not examining the cause, I'm going over the facts," said old Lauderdale, impatiently. "I tried him, and I very soon got to the end of him. He meant to do nothing. It was quite clear from the first. If he'd been a starving relation it would have been different. I should have made him work whether he liked it or not. As it was, I gave it up as a bad job. He wants to be idle, and he has

the means to be idle if he's willing to live on his mother. She has ten thousand dollars a year, and a house of her own, and they can live very well on that — just as well as they want to. When his mother dies that's what Jack will have, and if he chooses to marry on it — "

"You seem to forget that he's married already — "

"By Jove! I did! But it doesn't change things in the least. My position is just the same as it was before. With ten thousand a year Katharine Ralston couldn't support a family — "

"Indeed, I could! I'm Katharine Ralston, and I should be — "

"Nonsense! You're Katharine Lauderdale. I'm speaking of Jack's mother. I suppose you'll admit that she's not able to support her son's wife out of what she has. It would mean a great change in her way of living. At present she doesn't need more. She's often told me so. If she wanted money for herself, just to spend on herself, mind you — I'd give her — well, I won't say how much. But she doesn't. It's for Jack that she wants it. She's perfectly honest. She's just like a man in her way of talking, anyhow. And I don't want Jack to be throwing my money into the streets. I can do more good with it in other ways, and she gives him more than is good for him, as it is. People seem to think that if a man has more than a certain amount of money, he's under a sort of

moral obligation to society to throw it out of the window. That's a point of view I never could understand, though it comes quite naturally to Jack, I daresay. But I go back. I want to insist on that circumstance, and I want you to see the facts just as they are. If I were to settle another hundred thousand dollars on Jack's mother, it would be precisely the same thing, at present, as though I'd settled it on him, or on you. Now you say he wouldn't take any money if I offered it to him."

"No. He wouldn't, and I wouldn't let him if he wanted to."

"You needn't be afraid, my dear. I've no intention of doing anything so good-natured and foolish. If anything could complete Jack's ruin for all practical purposes, that would. No, no! I won't do it. I've given Kate Ralston a good many valuable jewels at one time and another since she married the Admiral — she's fond of good stones, you know. If Jack chooses to go to her and tell her the truth, and if she chooses to sell them and give him the money, it will keep you very comfortably for a long time —"

"How can you suggest such a thing!" cried Katharine, indignantly. "As though he would ever stoop to think of it!"

"Well — I hope he wouldn't. It wouldn't be pretty, if he did. But I'm a practical man, my dear, and I'm an old fellow and I've seen the

world on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean for over seventy years. So I look at the case from all possible points of view, fair and unfair, as most people would. But I don't mean to be unfair to Jack."

"I think you are, uncle Robert. If you've proved anything, you've proved that he isn't fit for a ranch — and so you say there's nothing left but the law or business. It seems to me that there are ever so many things — "

"If you'll name them, you'll help me," said old Lauderdale, seriously.

"I mean active things — to do with railroads, and all that — " Katharine stopped, feeling that her knowledge was rather vague.

"Oh! You mean to talk about railroading. I don't own any railroads myself, as I daresay you know, but I've picked up some information about them. Apart from the financing of them — and that's banking, which Jack objects to — there's the law part, which he doesn't like either, and the building of them, which he's too old to learn, and the mechanical part of them, such as locomotives and rolling stock, which he can't learn either — and then there are two places which men covet and for which there's an enormous competition amongst the best men for such matters in the country — I mean the freight agent's place and the passenger agent's. They are two big men, and they understand their business practically, because

they've learned it practically. To understand freight, a man must begin by putting on rough clothes and going down to the shed and handling freight himself, with the common freight men. There are gentlemen who have done that sort of thing — just as fine gentlemen as Jack Ralston, but made of quite different stuff. And it takes a very long time to reach a high position in that way, though it's worth having when you get it. Do you understand?"

"Yes — I suppose I do. But one always hears of men going off and succeeding in some out-of-the-way place —"

"But you hear very little about the ones who fail, and they're the majority. And you hear, still more often, people saying, as they do of Jack Ralston, that he ought to go away, and show some enterprise, and get something to do in the West. It's always the West, because most of the people who talk know nothing whatever about it. I tell you, Katharine, my dear, it's just as hard to start in this country as it is anywhere else, though men get on faster after they're once started — and all this talk about something active and an out-of-door existence is pure nonsense. It's nothing else. A man may have luck soon or late or never, but the safest plan for city-bred men is to begin at a bank. I did, and I've not regretted it. Just as soon as a fellow shows that he has something in him, he's

wanted, and if he has friends, as Jack has, they'll help him. But as long as a man hangs about the clubs all day with a cigarette in his mouth, sensible people, who want workers, will fight shy of him. Just tell Jack that, the next time you see him. It's all I've got to say, and if it doesn't satisfy him nothing can."

The old gentleman's anger had quite disappeared while he was speaking, though it was ready to burst out again on very small provocation. He spoke so earnestly, and put matters so plainly, that Katharine began to feel a blank disappointment closing in between her and her visions of the future in regard to an occupation for John. For the rest, she would have been just as determined to marry him after hearing all that her uncle had to say as she had been before. But she could not help showing what she felt, in her face and in the tone of her voice.

"Still — men do succeed, uncle Robert," she said, clinging rather desperately to the hope that he had only been lecturing her and had some pleasant surprise in store.

"Of course they do, my dear," he answered. "And it's possible for Jack to succeed, too, if he'll go about it in the right way."

"How?" asked Katharine, eagerly, and immediately her face brightened again.

"Just as I said. If he'll show that he can stick

to any sort of occupation for a year, I'll see what can be done."

"But that sticking, as you call it — all day at a desk — is just what he can't do. He wasn't made for it, he —"

"Well then, what is he made for? I wish you would get him to make a statement explaining his peculiar gifts —"

"Now don't be angry again, uncle Robert! This is rather a serious matter for Jack and me. Do you tell me, in real earnest, quite, quite honestly, that as far as you know the only way for Jack to earn his living is to go into an office for a year, to begin with? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, child. Upon my word — there, you'll believe me now, won't you? That's the only way I can see, if he really means to work. My dear — I'm not a boy, and I'm very fond of you — I've no reason for deceiving you, have I?"

"No, uncle dear — but you were angry at first, you know."

"No doubt. But I'm not angry now, nor are you. We've discussed the matter calmly. And we're putting out of the question the fact that if I chose to give Jack anything in the way of money, my cheque-book is in this drawer, and I have the power to do it — without any inconvenience," added the very rich man, thoughtfully. "But you tell me that he would not accept it. It's hard to believe,

but you know him better than I do, and I accept your statement. I may as well tell you that for the honour of the family and to get rid of all this nonsense about a secret marriage I'm perfectly willing to do this. Listen. I'll invite you all — the whole family — to my place on the river, and I'll tell them all what has happened and we'll have a sort of 'post facto' wedding there, very quietly, and then announce it to the world. And I'll settle enough on you, personally — not on your husband — to give you an income you can manage to live on comfortably — "

"Oh!" cried Katharine. "You're too kind, uncle Robert — and I thank you with all my heart — just as though we could take it from you — I do, indeed — "

"Never mind that, child. But you say you can't take it. You mean, I suppose, that if it were your money — if I made it so — Jack would refuse to live on it. Let's be quite clear."

"That's exactly it. He would never consent to live on it. He would feel — he'd be quite right, too — that we had got married first in order to force money out of you, for the honour of the family, as you said yourself."

"Yes. And it's particularly hard to force money out of me, too, though I'm not stingy, my dear. But I must say, if you had meant to do it, you couldn't have invented anything more ingenious,

or more successful. I couldn't allow a couple of young Lauderdales to go begging. They'd have pictures of me in the evening papers, you know. And apart from that, I'm devilish fond of you — I mean I'm very fond of you — you must excuse an old bachelor's English, sometimes. But you won't take the money, so that settles it. Then there's no other way but for Jack to go to work like a man and stick to it. To give him a salary for doing no work would be just the same as to give him money without making any pretence about it. He can have a desk at my lawyer's, or he can go back to Beman Brothers', — just as he prefers. If he'll do that, and honestly try to understand what he's doing, he shan't regret it. If he'll do what there is to be done, I'll make him succeed. I could make him succeed if he had 'failure' written all over him in letters a foot high — because it's within the bounds of possibility. But it's of no use to ask me to do what's not possible. I can't make this country over again. I can't create a convenient, active, out-of-door career at a good salary, when the thing doesn't exist. In other words, I can't work miracles, and he won't take money, so he must content himself to run on lines of possibility. My lawyer would do most things for me, and so would Beman Brothers. Beman, to please me, would make Jack a partner, as he has done for Ham Bright. But Jack must either work

or put in capital, and he has no capital to put in, and won't take any from me. And to be a partner in a law firm, a man must have some little experience — something beyond his bare degree. Do you see it all now, Katharine?"

"Indeed, I do," she answered, with a little sigh. "And meanwhile — uncle Robert — meanwhile —"

"Yes — I know — you're married. That's the very devil, that marriage business."

He seemed to be thinking it over. There was something so innocently sincere in his strong way of putting it that Katharine could not help smiling, even in her distress. But she waited for him to speak, foreseeing what he would say, and did.

"There's nothing for it," he said, at last. "You won't take money, and you can't live with your mother, and as for telling your father at this stage — well, you know him! It really wouldn't be safe. So there's nothing for it but — I hate to say it, my dear," he added kindly.

"But to keep it a secret, you mean," she said sadly.

"You see," he answered, in a tone that was almost apologetic, "it would be a mistake, socially, to say you were married, and to go on living each with your own family — besides, your father would know it like everybody else. He'd make your life very — unbearable, I should think."

"Yes — he would. I know that."

"Well — come and see me again soon, and we'll talk it over. You'll have to consider it just as a — I don't know exactly how to put it — a sort of formal betrothal between yourselves, such as they used to have in old times. And I suppose I'm the head of the family, though your grandfather is older than I am. Anyhow, you must consider it as though you were solemnly engaged, with the approval of the head of the family, and as though you were to be married, say, next year. Can you do that? Can you make him look at it in that light, child?"

"I'll try, since there's really nothing else to be done. But oh, uncle Robert, I wish I'd come before. You've been so kind! Why did it rain yesterday — oh, why did it rain?"

CHAPTER XVII.

When Katharine left Robert Lauderdale's house that morning, she felt that trouble had begun and was not to cease for a long time. She had entered her uncle's library full of hope, sure of success and believing that John Ralston's future depended only upon the rich man's good will and good word. She went out fully convinced at last that he must take one or the other of the much-despised chances he had neglected and forthwith do the best he could with it. She thought it was very hard, but she understood old Lauderdale's clear statement and she saw that there was no other way.

She sympathized deeply with John in his dislike of the daily drudgery, for which it was quite true that he was little fitted by nature or training. But she did her best to analyze that unfitness, so as to try and discover some gift or quality to balance it and neutralize it. And her first impulse was not to find him at once and tell him what had happened, but rather to put off the evil moment in which she must tell him the truth. This was the first sign of weakness which she had exhibited

since that Monday afternoon on which she had first persuaded him to take the decisive step.

She turned into Madison Avenue as soon as she could, for the sake of the quiet. The morning sun shone full in her eyes as she began to make her way southwards, and she was glad of the warmth, for she felt cold and inwardly chilled in mind and body. She had walked far, but she still walked on, disliking the thought of being penned in with a dozen or more of unsympathizing individuals for twenty minutes in a horse-car. Moreover, she instinctively wished to tire herself, as though to bring down her bodily energy to the low ebb at which her mental activity seemed to be stagnating. Strong people will understand that desire to balance mind and body.

She was quite convinced that her uncle was right. The more she turned the whole situation over, the clearer what he had said became to her. The only escape was to accept the money which he was willing to give her—for the honour of the family. But if neither she nor John would take that, there was no alternative but for John to go to work in the ordinary way, and show that he could be steady for at least a year. That seemed a very long time—as long as a year can seem to a girl of nineteen, which is saying much.

Katharine had seen such glorious visions for that year, too, that the darkness of the future was a

tangible horror now that they were fading away. The memory of a dream can be as vivid as the recollection of a reality. The something which John was to find to do had presented itself to her mind as a sort of idyllic existence somewhere out of the world, in which there should be woods and brooks and breezes, and a convenient town not far away, where things could be got, and a cottage quite unlike other cottages, and a good deal of shooting and fishing and riding, with an amount of responsibility for all these things equal in money to six or seven thousand dollars a year, out of which Katharine was sure that she could save a small fortune in a few years. It had not been quite clear to her why the responsibility was to be worth so much in actual coin of the Republic, but people certainly succeeded very quickly in the West. Besides, she was quite ready to give up all the luxuries and amusements of social existence — much more ready to do so than John Ralston, if she had known the truth.

It must not be believed that she was utterly visionary and unpractical, because she had taken this rose-coloured view of the life uncle Robert was to provide for her and her husband. There are probably a great many young women in the Eastern cities who imagine just such things to be quite possible, and quite within the power and gift of a millionaire, in the American sense of that word,

which implies the possession of more than one million, and more often refers in actual use to income than merely to capital. In Paris, a man who has twenty thousand dollars a year is called a millionaire. In New York a man with that income is but just beyond the level of the estimable society poor, and within the ranks of the 'fairly well-off.' The great fortunes being really as fabulous as those in fairy tales, it is not surprising that the possession of them should be supposed to bring with it an almost fabulous power in all directions. Men like Robert Lauderdale, the administration of whose estates requires a machinery not unlike that of a small nation's treasury, are thought to have in their gift all sorts of remunerative positions, for which the principal qualifications are an unlimited capacity for enjoying the fresh air and some talent for fishing. As a matter of fact, though so much richer than ordinary men, they are so much poorer than all except the very small nations that they cannot support so many idlers.

Katharine knew a good deal about life in New York and its possibilities, but very little of what could be done elsewhere. She was perfectly well aware of the truth of all that her uncle had told her concerning the requirements for business or the law, for she had heard such matters discussed often enough. In her own city she was practical, for she understood her surroundings as well as

any young girl could. It was because she understood them that she dreamed of getting out of them as soon as practicable, and of beginning that vaguely active and remunerative existence which, for her, lay west of Illinois and anywhere beyond that, even to the shores of the Pacific Ocean. John Ralston himself knew very little about it, but he had rightly judged its mythical nature when he had told her that Robert Lauderdale would do nothing for him.

The sun warmed Katharine as she walked down Madison Avenue, but everything was black — felt black, she would have said, had she thought aloud. Ralston would not turn upon her and say, 'I told you so,' because he loved her, but she could see the expression of his face as she looked forward to the interview. He would nod his head slowly and say nothing. The corners of his mouth would be drawn down for a moment and his eyelids would contract a little while he looked away from her. He would think the matter over during about half a minute, and then, with a look of determination, he would say that he would try what uncle Robert proposed. He would not say anything against the plan of keeping the marriage a secret, now that old Lauderdale knew of it, for he would see at once that there was absolutely nothing else to be done. They had gone over the possibilities so often — there was not one which they had not carefully

considered. It was all so hopelessly against them still, in spite of the one great effort Katharine had made that morning.

She walked more slowly after she had passed the high level above the railway, where it runs out of the city under ground from the central station. As she came nearer to the neighbourhood in which John lived, she felt for the first time in her life that she did not wish to meet him. Though she did not admit to herself that she feared to tell him the result of her conversation with her uncle, and though she had no intention of going to his mother's house and asking for him, her pace slackened at the mere idea of being nearer to him.

Then she realized what she was doing, and with a bitter little smile of contempt at her own weakness she walked on more briskly. She had often read in books of that sudden change in the aspect of the outer world which disappointment brings, but she had never quite believed in it before. She realized it now. There was no light in anything. The faces of the people who passed her looked dead and uninteresting. Every house looked as though a funeral procession might at any moment file out of its door. The very pavement, drying in patches in the sunshine, felt cold and unsympathetic under her feet.

She began to wonder what she had better do, — whether she should write John Ralston a long let-

ter, explaining everything, or whether she should write him a short one, merely saying that the news was unfavourable—'unfavourable' sounded better than 'bad' or 'disappointing,' she thought —and asking him to come and see her in the afternoon. The latter course seemed preferable, and had, moreover, the advantage of involving fewer practical difficulties, for her command over her mother tongue was by no means very great when subjected to the test of black and white, though in conversation it was quite equal to her requirements on most occasions. She could even entirely avoid the use of slang, by making a determined effort, for her father detested it, and her mother's conversational weaknesses were Southern and of a different type. But on paper she was never sure of being quite right. Punctuation was a department which she affected to despise, but which she inwardly feared, and when alone she admitted that there were words which she seemed to spell not as they were spelled in books—'parallel,' for instance, 'psychology' and 'responsibility.' She avoided those words, which were not very necessary to her, but with a disagreeable suspicion that there might be others. Had 'develop' an 'e' at the end of it, or had it not? She could never remember, and the dictionary lived in her grandfather's den, at some distance from her own room. The difficulties of writing a long letter to John Ralston, whose

mother had taught him his English before it could be taught him all wrong at a fashionable school, rose before her eyes with absurd force, and she decided forthwith to send for Ralston in the afternoon.

Having come to a preliminary conclusion, life seemed momentarily a little easier. She turned out of her way into Fourth Avenue, took a horse-car, got transferred to a Christopher Street one, and in the course of time got out at the corner of Clinton Place. She wrote the shortest possible note to John Ralston, went out again, bought a special delivery stamp and took the letter up to the Thirteenth Street Post-Office — instead of dropping it into an ordinary letter-box. She did everything, in short, to make the message reach its destination as quickly as possible without employing a messenger.

Charlotte Slayback appeared at luncheon. She preferred that meal when she invited herself, because her father was never present, and a certain amount of peaceful conversation was possible in his absence. It was some time since she had been in New York, and the glimpse of her old room on the previous afternoon irresistibly attracted her again. Katharine hoped, however, that she would not stay long, as Ralston was to come at three o'clock, this being usually the safest hour for his visits. Mrs. Lauderdale would then be either at work or out of the house, the philan-

thropist would be dozing upstairs in a cloud of smoke before a table covered with reports, and Alexander Junior would be still down town. In consideration of the importance of getting Charlotte out of the way, Katharine was more than usually cordial to her — a mistake often made by young people, who do not seem to understand the very simple fact that the best way to make people go away is generally to be as disagreeable as possible.

The consequence was that Charlotte enjoyed herself immensely, and it required the sight of her father's photograph, which stood upon Mrs. Lauderdale's writing-table in the library, to keep her from proposing to spend two or three days in the house after her husband should have gone back to Washington. But the photograph was there, and it was one taken by the platinum process, which made the handsome, steely face look more metallic than ever. Charlotte gazed at it thoughtfully, and could almost hear the maxims of virtue and economy with which those even lips had preached her down since she had been a child, and she decided that she would not stay. Her husband was not to her taste, but he never preached.

Mrs. Lauderdale had for her eldest daughter that sentiment which is generally described as a mother's love, and which, as Frank Miner had once rather coarsely put it, will stand more knock-

ing about than old boots. Charlotte was spoiled, capricious, frivolous in the extreme, ungrateful beyond description, weak where she should have been strong and strong where she should have been tender. And Mrs. Lauderdale knew it all, and loved her in spite of it all, though she disapproved of her almost at every point. Charlotte had one of those characters of which people are apt to say that they might have turned out splendidly, if properly trained, than which no more foolish expression falls from the lips of commonplace, virtuous humanity. Charlotte, like many women who resemble her, had received an excellent training. The proof was that, when she chose to behave herself, no one could seem to be more docile, more thoughtful and considerate of others or more charming in conversation. She had only to wish to appear well, as the phrase goes, and the minutest details necessary to success were absolutely under her control. What people meant when they said that she might have turned out splendidly — though they did not at all understand the fact — was that a woman possessing Charlotte Slayback's natural gifts and acquired accomplishments might have been a different person if she had been born with a very different character — a statement quite startling in its great simplicity. As it was, there was nothing to be done. Charlotte had been admirably 'trained' in every way — so

well that she could exhibit the finest qualities, on occasion, without any perceptible effort, even when she felt the utmost reluctance to do so. But the occasions were few, and were determined by questions of personal advantage, and even more often by mere caprice.

On that particular day, when she lunched quietly in her old home, her conduct was little short of angelic, and Katharine found it hard to realize that she was the same woman who on the previous afternoon had made such an exhibition of contemptible pettiness and unreasoning discontent. Katharine, had she known her sister less well, would almost have been inclined to believe that Benjamin Slayback of Nevada was a person with whom no wife of ordinary sensibility would possibly live. But she knew Charlotte very well indeed.

And as the hands of the clock went round towards three, Charlotte showed no intention of going away, to Katharine's infinite annoyance, for she knew that Ralston would be punctual, and would probably come even a little before the time she had named. It would not do to let him walk into the library, after the late scene between him and her mother. The latter had said nothing more about the matter, but only one day had intervened since Mrs. Lauderdale had so unexpectedly expressed her total disapproval of Katharine's rela-

tions with John. It was not probable that Mrs. Lauderdale, who was not a changeable woman, would go back to her original position in the course of a few hours, and there would certainly be trouble if John appeared with no particular excuse.

Katharine, as may be imagined, was by no means in a normal mood, and if she made herself agreeable to her sister, it was not at first without a certain effort, which did not decrease, in spite of Charlotte's own exceptionally good temper, because as the latter grew more and more amiable, she also seemed more and more inclined to spend the whole afternoon where she was.

Hints about going out, about going upstairs to the room in which Mrs. Lauderdale painted, about possible visitors, had no effect whatever. Charlotte was enjoying herself and her mother was delighted to keep her and listen to her conversation. Katharine thought at last that she should be reduced to the necessity of waiting in the entry until Ralston came, in order to send him away again before he could get into the library by mistake. She hated the plan, which certainly lacked dignity, and she watched the hands of the clock, growing nervous and absent in what she said, as she saw that the fatal hour was approaching.

At twenty minutes to three Charlotte was describing to her mother the gown worn by the English ambassadress at the last official dinner

at the White House. At a quarter to three she was giving an amusing account of the last filibustering affray in the House, which she had witnessed — it having been arranged beforehand to take place at a given point in the proceedings — from the gallery reserved for members' families. Five minutes later she was telling anecdotes about a deputation from the South Sea Islands. Katharine could hardly sit still as she watched the inexorable hands. At five minutes to three Charlotte struck the subject of painting, and Katharine felt that it was all over. Suddenly Charlotte herself glanced at the clock and sprang up.

"I had forgotten all about poor little Crowdie!" she exclaimed. "He was coming at three to take me to the Loan Exhibition," she added, looking about her for her hat and gloves.

"Here?" asked Katharine, aghast.

"Oh, no — at the hotel, of course. I must run as fast as I can. There are still cabs at the Brevoort House corner, aren't there? Thank you, my dear —" Katharine had found all her things and was already tying on the little veil. "I do hope he'll wait."

"Of course he will!" answered Katharine, with amazing certainty. "You're all right, dear — now run!" she added, pushing her sister towards the door.

"Do come to dinner, Charlie!" cried Mrs. Lau-

derdale, following her. "It's so nice to see something of you!"

"Oh, yes — she'll come — but you mustn't keep her, mamma — she's awfully late as it is!"

From a condition of apparently hopeless apathy, Katharine was suddenly roused to exert all her energies. It was two minutes to three as she closed the glass door behind her sister. Fortunately Ralston had not come before his time.

"I suppose you're going to work now, mamma?" Katharine suggested, doing her best to speak calmly, as she turned to her mother, who was standing in the door of the library.

She had never before wished that Ralston were an unpunctual man, nor that her mother, to whom she was devotedly attached, were at the bottom of the sea.

"Oh, yes! I suppose so," answered Mrs. Lauderdale. "How delightful Charlotte was to-day, wasn't she?"

Her face was fresh and rested. She leaned against the doorpost as though deciding whether to go upstairs at once or to go back into the library. With a movement natural to her she raised her graceful arms, folding her hands together behind her head, and leaning back against the woodwork, looking lazily at Katharine as she did so. She felt that small difficulty, at the moment, of going back to the daily occupation after spending an

exceptionally pleasant hour in some one's company, which is familiar to all hard workers. Katharine stood still, trying to hide her anxiety. The clock must be just going to strike, she thought.

"What's the matter, child? You seem nervous and worried about something." She asked the question with a certain curiosity.

"Do I?" asked Katharine, trying to affect indifference.

Mrs. Lauderdale did not move. In the half light of the doorway she was still very beautiful, as she stood there trying to make up her mind to go to her work. Katharine was in despair, and turned over the cards that lay in a deep dish on the table, reading the names mechanically.

"Yes," continued her mother. "You look as though you were expecting something — or somebody."

The clock struck, and almost at the same instant Katharine heard Ralston's quick, light tread on the stone steps outside the house. She had a sudden inspiration.

"There's a visitor coming, mother!" she whispered quickly. "Run away, and I'll tell Annie not to let him in."

Mrs. Lauderdale, fortunately, did not care to receive any one, but instead of going upstairs she merely nodded, just as the bell rang, and retired into the library again, shutting the door behind

her. Katharine was left alone in the entry, and she could see the dark, indistinct shape of John Ralston through the ground-glass pane of the front door. She hesitated an instant, doubting whether it would not be wisest to open the door herself, send him away, and then, slipping on her things, to follow him a moment later into the street. But in the same instant she reflected that her mother had very possibly gone to the window to see who the visitor had been when he should descend the steps again. Most women do that in houses where it is possible. Then, too, her mother would expect to hear Annie's footsteps passing the library, as the girl went to the front door.

There was the dining-room, and it could be reached from the entry by passing through the pantry. Annie was devoted to Katharine, and at a whispered word would lead Ralston silently thither. The closed room between the dining-room and the library would effectually cut off the sound of voices. But that, too, struck Katharine as being beneath her — to confide in a servant! She could not do it, and was further justified by the reflection that even if she followed that course, her mother, who was doubtless at the window, would not see Ralston go away, and would naturally conclude that the visitor had remained in the house, whoever he might be.

Katharine stood irresolute, watching Ralston's

shadow on the pane, and listening to Annie's rapidly approaching tread from the regions of the pantry at the end of the entry. A moment later and the girl was by her side.

"If it's Mr. Ralston, don't shut the door again till I've spoken to him," she said, in a low voice. "My mother isn't receiving, if it's a visitor."

She stood behind Annie as the latter opened the door. John was there, as she had expected, and Annie stepped back. Katharine raised her finger to her lips, warning him not to speak. He looked surprised, but stood bareheaded on the threshold.

"You must go away at once, Jack," she whispered. "My mother is in the library, looking out of the window, and I can't possibly see you alone. Wait for me near the door at the Assembly to-night. Go, dear — it's impossible now. I'll tell you afterwards."

In her anxiety not to rouse her mother's suspicions, she shut the door almost before he had nodded his assent. She scarcely saw the blank look that came into his face, and the utter disappointment in his eyes.

Seeing that the door was shut, Annie turned and went away. Katharine hesitated a moment, passed her hand over her brow, glanced mechanically once more at the cards in the china dish on the table and then went into the library. To her surprise her mother was not there, but the folding door

which led to the dark drawing-room was half rolled back, and it was clear that Mrs. Lauderdale had gone through the dining-room, and had probably reached her own apartment by the back staircase of the house. Katharine was on the point of running into the street and calling Ralston back. She hesitated a moment, and then going hastily to the window threw up the sash and looked out, hoping that he might be still within hearing. But looking eastward, towards Fifth Avenue, he was not to be seen amongst the moving pedestrians, of whom there were many just then. She turned to see whether he had taken the other direction, and saw him at once, but already far down the street, walking fast, with his head bent low and his hands in the pockets of his overcoat. He was evidently going to take the elevated road up town.

"Oh, Jack — I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed softly to herself, still looking after him as he disappeared in the distance.

Then she drew down the window again, and went and sat in her accustomed place in the small armchair opposite to her mother's sofa. She thought very uncharitably of Charlotte during the next quarter of an hour, but she promised herself to get into a corner with Ralston that evening, at the great ball, and to explain all the circumstances to him as minutely as they have been explained here. She was angry with her mother, too, for not

having gone up the front staircase, as she might just as well have done, but she was very glad she had not condescended to the manœuvre of introducing John into the dining-room by the back way, as she would have probably just met Mrs. Lauderdale as the latter passed through. On the whole, it seemed to Katharine that she had done as wisely as the peculiarly difficult circumstances had allowed, and that although there was much to regret, she had done nothing of which she needed to repent.

It seemed to her, too, as she began to recover from the immediate annoyance of failure, that she had gained several hours more than she had expected, in which to think over what she should say to Ralston when they met. And she at once set herself the task of recalling everything that Robert Lauderdale had said to her, with the intention of repeating it as accurately as possible, since she could not expect to say it any better than he had said it himself. It was necessary that Ralston should understand it, as she had understood it, and should see that although uncle Robert was quite ready to be generous he could not undertake to perform miracles. Those had been the old gentleman's own words.

Then she began to wonder whether, after all, it would not be better to accept what he offered — the small, settled income which was so good to

think of — and to get rid of all this secrecy, which oppressed her much more since she had been told that it must last, than when she had expected that it would involve at most the delay of a week. The deep depression which she began to feel at her heart, now that she was alone again, made the simple means of escape from all her anxieties look very tempting to her, and she dwelt on it. If she begged Ralston to forget his pride for her sake, as she was willing to forget her own for his, and to let her take the money, he would surely yield. Once together, openly married before the world, things would be so much easier. He and she could talk all day, unhindered and unobserved, and plan the future at their leisure, and it was not possible that with all the joint intelligence they could bring to bear upon the problem, it should still remain unsolved.

Meanwhile, Ralston had gone up town, very much more disappointed than Katharine knew. Strange to say, their marriage seemed far more important in his eyes than in hers, and he had lived all day, since they had parted at ten o'clock in the morning, in nervous anticipation of seeing her again before night. He had gone home at once, and had spent the hours alone, for his mother had gone out to luncheon. Until the messenger with Katharine's specially stamped letter rang at the door, he would not have gone out of

the house for any consideration, and after he had read it he sat counting the minutes until he could reasonably expect to use up the remaining time in walking to Clinton Place. As it was, he had reached the corner a quarter of an hour before the time, and his extreme punctuality was to be accounted for by the fact that he had set his watch with the Lauderdales' library clock, — as he always did nowadays, — and that he looked at it every thirty seconds, as he walked up and down the street, timing himself so exactly that the hands were precisely at the hour of three when he took hold of the bell.

There are few small disappointments in the world comparable with that of a man who has been told by the woman he loves to come at a certain hour, who appears at her door with military punctuality and who is told to go away again instantly, no adequate excuse being given for the summary dismissal. Men all know that, but few women realize it.

"Considering the rather unusual situation," thought Ralston, angrily, "she might have managed to get her mother out of the way for half an hour. Besides, her mother wouldn't have stoned me to death, if she had let me come in — and, after last night, I shouldn't think she would care very much for the sort of privacy one has in a ballroom."

He had waited all day to see her, and he had nothing to do until the evening, when he had to go to a dinner-party before the Assembly ball. He naturally thought of his club, as a quiet place where he could be alone with his annoyances and disappointments between three and four o'clock, and he took the elevated road as the shortest way of getting there.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Ralston was in a thoroughly bad humour when he reached his club. The absurdity of a marriage, which was practically no marriage at all, had been thrust upon him on the very first day, and he felt that he had been led into a romantic piece of folly, which could not possibly produce any good results, either at the present time or afterwards. He was as properly and legally the husband of Katharine as the law and the church could make him, and yet he could not even get an interview of a quarter of an hour with his wife. He could not count, with certainty, upon seeing her anywhere, except at such a public place as the ball they were both going to that night, under the eyes of all New York society, so far as it existed for them. The position was ludicrous, or would have been, had he not been the principal actor in the comedy.

He was sure, too, that if Katharine had got any favourable answer from their uncle Robert, she would have said at least a word to this effect, even while she was in the act of thrusting him from the door. Two words, 'all right,' would have been enough. But she had only seemed anxious to get rid

of him as quickly as possible, and he felt that he was not to be blamed for being angry. The details of the situation, as she had seen it, were quite unknown to him. He was not aware that Charlotte Slayback had been at luncheon, and had stayed until the last minute, nor that Katharine had really done everything in her power to make her mother go upstairs. The details, indeed, taken separately, were laughable in their insignificance, and it would hardly be possible for Katharine to explain them to him, so as to make him see their importance when taken all together. He was ignorant of them all, except of the fancied fact that Mrs. Lauderdale had been at the window of the library. Katharine had told him so, and had believed it herself, as was natural. She had not had time to explain why she believed it, and he would be more angry than ever if she ever told him that she had been mistaken, and that he might just as well have come and stayed as long as he pleased. He knew that a considerable time must have elapsed between the end of luncheon and his arrival at the door of the house; he supposed that Katharine had been alone with her mother and grandfather, as usual, and he blamed her for not exerting a little tact in getting her mother out of the way, when she must have had nearly an hour in which to do so. He went over and over all that he knew of the facts, and reached always

the same conclusion — Katharine had not taken the trouble, and had probably only remembered when it was too late that he was to come at three o'clock.

It must not be supposed that Ralston belonged to the class of hasty and capricious men, who hate the object of their affections as soon as they are in the least annoyed with anything she has done — or who, at all events, act as though they did. Ralston was merely in an excessively bad temper with himself, with everything he had done and with the world at large. Had he received a note from Katharine at any time later in the afternoon, telling him to come back, he would have gone instantly, with just as much impatience as he had shown at three o'clock, when he had reached Clinton Place a quarter of an hour before the appointed time. He would probably not have alluded, nor even have wished to allude, to his summary dismissal at his first attempt. But he would come. He satisfied himself of that, for he sent a message from his club to his home, directing the servant to send on any note which might come for him; and, on repeating the message an hour later, he was told that there was nothing to send.

So he sat in the general room at the club, downstairs, and turned over a newspaper half a dozen times without understanding a word of its contents, and smoked discontentedly, but without ceasing.

At last, by a mere accident, his eye fell upon the column of situations offered and wanted, and, with a sour smile, he began to read the advertisements. That sort of thing suited his case, at all events, he thought. He was very soon struck by the balance of numbers in favour of the unemployed, and by the severe manner in which those who offered situations spoke of thorough knowledge and of certificates of service.

It did not take him long to convince himself that he was fit for nothing but a shoeblack or a messenger boy, and he fancied that his age would be a drawback in either profession. He dropped the paper in disgust at last, and was suddenly aware that Frank Miner was seated at a small table opposite to him, but on the other side of the room. Miner looked up at the same moment, from a letter he was writing, his attention being attracted by the rustling of the paper.

"Hallo, Jack!" he cried, cheerily. "I knew those were your legs all the time."

"Why didn't you speak, then?" asked Ralston, rather coldly, and looking up and down the columns of the paper he had dropped upon his knee.

"I don't know. Why should I?" Miner went on with his letter, having evidently interrupted himself in the midst of a sentence.

Ralston wished something would happen. He felt suddenly inclined to throw something at Miner,

who generally amused him when he talked, but was clearly very busy, and went on writing as though his cheerful little life depended on it. But it was not probable that anything should happen just at that hour. There were three or four other men in different parts of the big room, writing or reading letters. There were doubtless a few others somewhere in the house, playing cards or drinking a quiet afternoon cocktail. It was a big club, having many rooms. But Ralston did not feel inclined to play poker, and he wished not to drink, if he could help it, and Miner went on writing, so he stayed where he was, and brooded over his annoyances. Suddenly Miner's pen ceased with a scratch and a dash, audible all over the room, and he began to fold his letter.

"Come and have a drink, Jack!" he called out to Ralston, as he took up an envelope. "I've earned it, if you haven't."

"I don't want to drink," answered Ralston, gloomily, and, out of pure contrariety, he took up his paper again.

Miner looked long and steadily at him, closed his letter, put it into his pocket and crossed the room.

"I say, Jack," he said, in an absurdly solemn tone, "are you ill, old man?"

"Ill? No. Why? Never was better in my life. Don't be an idiot, Frank." And he kept his paper at the level of his eyes.

"There's something wrong, anyhow," said Miner, thoughtfully. "Never knew you to refuse to drink before. I'll be damned, you know!"

"I haven't a doubt of it, my dear fellow. I always told you so."

"For a gentle and unassuming manner, I think you take the cake, Jack," answered Miner, without a smile. "What on earth is the matter with you? Let me see — you've either lost money, or you're in love, or your liver's out of order, or all three, and if that's it, I pity you."

"I tell you there's nothing the matter with me!" cried Ralston, with some temper. "Why do you keep bothering me? I merely said I didn't want to drink. Can't a man not be thirsty? Confound it all, I'm not obliged to drink if I don't want to!"

"Oh, well, don't get into a fiery green rage about it, Jack. I'm thirsty myself, and I didn't want to drink alone. Only, don't go west of Maine so long as this lasts. They're prohibition there, you know. Don't try it, Jack; you'd come back on ice by the next train."

"I'm going to stay here," answered Ralston, without a smile. "Go ahead and get your drink."

"All right! If you won't, you won't, I know. But when you're scratching round and trying to get some sympathetic person, like Abraham and Lazarus, to give you a glass of water, think of what you've missed this afternoon!"

"Dives," said Ralston, savagely, "is the only man ever mentioned in the Bible as having asked for a glass of water, and he's — where he ought to be."

"That's an old, cold chestnut," retorted Miner, turning to go, but not really in the least annoyed.

At that moment a servant crossed the room and stood before Ralston. Miner waited to see what would happen, half believing that Ralston was not in earnest, but had surreptitiously touched the electric bell on the table at his elbow, with the intention of ordering something.

"Mr. Lauderdale wishes to speak to you at the telephone, sir," said the servant.

The man's expression betrayed his respect for the name, and for a person who had a telephone in his house — an unusual thing in New York. It was the sort of expression which the waiters at restaurants put on when they present to the diner a dish of terrapin or a canvas-back duck, or open a very particularly old bottle of very particularly fine wine — quite different from the stolid look they wear for beef and table-claret.

"Which Mr. Lauderdale?" asked Ralston, with a sudden frown. "Mr. Alexander Lauderdale Junior?"

"I don't know, sir. The gentleman's at the telephone, sir."

This seemed to be added as a gentle hint not to

keep any one of the name of Lauderdale waiting too long.

Ralston rose quickly, and Miner watched him as he passed out with long strides and a rather anxious face, wondering what could be the matter with his friend, and somehow connecting his refusal to drink with the summons to the instrument. Then Miner followed slowly in the same direction, with his hands in his pockets and his lips pursed as though he were about to whistle. He knew the man well enough to be aware that his refusal to drink might proceed from his having taken all he could stand for the present, and Ralston's ill temper inclined Miner to believe that this might be the case. Ralston rarely betrayed himself at all, until he suddenly became viciously unmanageable, a fact which made him always the function of a doubtful quantity, as Miner, who had once learned a little mathematics, was fond of expressing it.

The little man was essentially sociable, and though he might want the very small and mild drink he was fond of ever so much, he preferred, if possible, to swallow it in company. Instead of ringing, therefore, he strolled away in search of another friend. As luck would have it, he almost ran against Walter Crowdie, who was coming towards him, but looking after Ralston, as the latter disappeared at the other end of the hall.

Crowdie seemed excessively irritated about something.

"Confound that fellow!" he exclaimed, giving vent to his feelings as he turned and saw Miner close upon him.

"Who? Me?" enquired the little man, with a laugh. "Everybody's purple with rage in this club to-day — I'm going home."

"You? No — is that you, Frank? No — I mean that everlasting Ralston."

"Oh! What's he done to you? What's the matter with Ralston?"

"Drunk again, I suppose," answered Crowdie. "But I wish he'd keep out of my way when he is — runs into me, treads on both my feet — with his heels, I believe, though I don't understand how that's possible — pushes me out of the way and goes straight on without a word. Confound him, I say! You used to be able to swear beautifully, Frank — can't you manage to say something?"

"At any other time — oh, yes! But you'd better get Ralston himself to do it for you. I'm not in it with him to-day. He's been giving me the life to come — hot — and Abraham and Isaac and Lazarus and the rich man, and the glass of water, all in a breath. Go and ask him for what you want."

"Oh — then he is drunk, is he?" asked Crowdie, with a disagreeable sneer on his red lips.

"I suppose so," answered Miner, quite carelessly.

"At all events, he refused to drink — that's always a bad sign with him."

"Of course — that makes it a certainty. Gad, though! It doesn't make him light on his feet, if he happens to tread on yours. It serves me right for coming to the club at this time of day! Perdition on the fellow! I've got on new shoes, too!"

"What are you two squabbling about?" enquired Hamilton Bright, coming suddenly upon them out of the cloak-room.

"We're not squabbling — we're cursing Ralston," answered Miner.

"I wish you'd go and look after him, Ham," said Crowdie to his brother-in-law. "He's just gone off there. He's as drunk as the dickens, and swearing against everybody and treading on their toes in the most insolent way imaginable. Get him out of this, can't you? Take him home — you're his friend. If you don't he'll be smashing things before long."

"Is he as bad as that, Frank?" asked Bright, gravely. "Where is he?"

"At the telephone — I don't know — he trod on Crowdie's feet and Crowdie's perfectly wild and exaggerates. But there's something wrong, I know. I think he's not exactly screwed — but he's screwed up — well, several pegs, by the way he acts. They call drinks 'pegs' somewhere, don't they? I

wanted to make a joke. I thought it might do Crowdie good — "

"Well, it's a very bad one," said Bright. "He's at the telephone, you say?"

"Yes. The man said Mr. Lauderdale wanted to speak to him — he didn't know which Mr. Lauderdale — but it's probably Alexander the Safe, and if it is, there's going to be a row over the wires. When Jack's shut up there alone in the dark in the sound-proof box with the receiver under his nose and Alexander at the other end — if the wires don't melt — that's all! And Alexander's a metallic sort of man — I should think he'd draw the lightning right down to his toes."

At that moment Ralston came swinging down the hall at a great pace, pale and evidently under some sort of powerful excitement. He nodded carelessly to the three men as they stood together and disappeared into the cloak-room. Bright followed him, but Ralston, with his hat on, his head down and struggling into his overcoat, rushed out as Bright reached the door, and ran into the latter, precisely as he had run into Crowdie. Bright was by far the heavier man, however, and Ralston stumbled at the shock. Bright caught him by one arm and held him a moment.

"All right, Ham!" he exclaimed. "Everybody gets into my way to-day. Let go, man! I'm in a hurry!"

"Wait a bit," said Bright. "I'll come with you —"

"No — you can't. Let me go, Ham! What the deuce are you holding me for?"

He shook Bright's arm angrily, for between the message he had received and the obstacles he seemed to meet at every step, he was, by this time, very much excited. Bright thought he read certain well-known signs in his face, and believed that he had been drinking hard and might get into trouble if he went out alone, for Ralston was extremely quarrelsome at such times, and was quite capable of hitting out on the slightest provocation, and had been in trouble more than once for doing so, as Bright was well aware.

"I'm going with you, Jack, whether you like it or not," said the latter, with mistaken firmness in his good intentions.

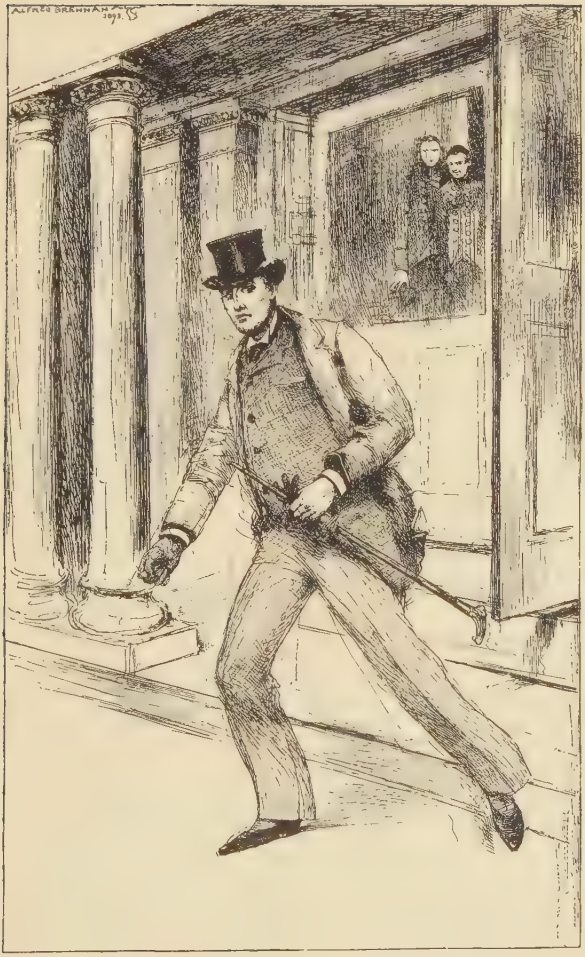
"You're not, I can tell you!" answered Ralston, in a lower tone. "Just let me go — or there'll be trouble here."

He was furious at the delay, but Bright's powerful hand did not relax its grasp on his arm.

"Jack, old man," said Bright, in a coaxing tone, "just come upstairs for a quarter of an hour, and get quiet —"

"Oh — that's it, is it? You think I'm screwed. I'm not. Let me go — once — twice —"

Ralston's face was now white with anger. The



"Before he could even raise his head, Ralston was out of the door and in the street."—Vol. II., p. 57.

unjust accusation was the last drop. He was growing dangerous, but Bright, in the pride of his superior strength, still held him firmly.

"Take care!" said Ralston, almost in a whisper. "I've counted two." He paused a full two seconds. "Three! There you go!"

The other men saw his foot glide forward like lightning over the marble pavement. Instantly Bright was thrown heavily on his back, and before he could even raise his head, Ralston was out of the door and in the street. Crowdie and Miner ran forward to help the fallen man, as they had not moved from where they had stood, a dozen paces away. But Bright was on his feet in an instant, pale with anger and with the severe shock of his fall. He turned his back on his companions at once, pretending to brush the dust from his coat by the bright light which fell through the glass door. Frank Miner stood near him, very quiet, his hands in his pockets, as usual, and a puzzled look in his face.

"Look here, Bright," he said gravely, watching Bright's back. "This sort of thing can't go on, you know."

Bright said nothing, but continued to dust himself, though there was not the least mark on his clothes.

"Upon my word," observed Crowdie, walking slowly up and down in his ungraceful way. "I

think we'd better call a meeting at once and have him requested to take his name off. If that isn't conduct unbecoming a gentleman, I don't know what is."

"No," said Miner. "That wouldn't do. It would stick to him for life. All the same, Bright, this is a club — it isn't a circus — and this sort of horse-play is just a little too much. Why don't you turn round? There's no dust on you — they keep the floor of the arena swept on purpose when Ralston's about. But it's got to stop — it's got to stop right here."

Bright's big shoulders squared themselves all at once and he faced about, apparently quite cool again.

"I say," he began, "did anybody see that but you two?" He looked up and down the deserted hall.

"No — wait a bit, though — halloa! Where are the hall servants? There ought to be two of them. They must have just gone off. There they are, on the other side of the staircase. Robert! And you — whatever your name is — come here!"

The two servants came forward at once. They had retired to show their discretion and at the same time to observe what happened, the moment they had seen Bright catch Ralston's arm.

"Look here," said Bright to them. "If you say anything about what you saw just now, you'll

have to go. Do you understand? As we shan't speak of it, we shall know that you have, if it's talked about. That's all right — you can go now. I just wanted you to understand."

The two servants bowed gravely. They respected Bright, and, like all servants, they worshiped Ralston. There was little fear of their indiscretion. Bright turned to Crowdie and Miner.

"If anybody has anything to say about this, I have," he said. "I'm the injured person if any one is. And of course I shall say nothing, and I'll beg you to say nothing either. Of course, if he ever falls foul of you, you're free to do as you please, and of course you might, if you chose, bring this thing before the committee. But I know you won't speak of it — either of you. We've all been screwed once or twice in our lives, I suppose. As for me, I'm his friend, and he didn't know what he was doing. He's a deuced good fellow at heart, but he's infernally hasty when he's had too much. That's all right, isn't it? I can trust you, can't I?"

"Oh, yes, as far as I'm concerned," said Crowdie, speaking first. "If you like that sort of thing, I've nothing to say. You're quite big enough to take care of yourself. I hope Hester won't hear it. She wouldn't like the idea of her brother being knocked about without defending himself. I don't particularly like it myself."

"That's nonsense, Walter, and you know it is,"

answered Bright, curtly, and he turned to Miner with a look of enquiry.

"All right, Ham!" said the little man. "I'm not going to tell tales, if you aren't. All the same —I don't want to seem squeamish, and old-maidish, and a frump generally — but I don't think I do remember just such a thing happening in any club I ever belonged to. Oh, well! Don't let's stand here talking ourselves black in the face. He's gone, this time, and he'll never find his way back if he once gets round the corner. You'll hear to-morrow that he's been polishing Tiffany's best window with a policeman. That's about his pressure when he gets a regular jag on. As for me, I've been trying to get somebody to have a drink with me for just three quarters of an hour, and so far my invitations have come back unopened. I suppose you won't refuse a pilot's two fingers after the battle, Ham?"

"What's a pilot's two fingers?" asked Bright. "I'll accept your hospitality to that modest extent, anyhow. Show us."

"It's this," said Miner, holding up his hand with the forefinger and little finger extended and the others turned in. "The little finger is the bottom," he explained, "and you don't count the others till you get to the forefinger, and just a little above the top of that you can see the whiskey. Understand? What will you have, Crowdie?"

"A drop of maraschino, thanks," said the painter.

"Maraschino!" Miner made a wry face at the thought of the sugary stuff. "All right then, come in!"

They all went back together into the room in which Ralston and Miner had been sitting before the trouble began. Crowdie and his brother-in-law were not on very good terms. The former behaved well enough when they met, but Bright's dislike for him was not to be concealed — which was strange, considering that Bright was a sensible and particularly self-possessed man, who was generally said to be of a gentle disposition, inclined to live harmoniously with his surroundings. He soon went away, leaving the artist and the man of letters to themselves. Miner did not like Crowdie very much either, but he admired him as an artist and had the faculty of making him talk.

If Ralston had really been drinking, he could not have been in a more excited state than when he left the club, leaving his best friend stretched on his back in the hall. He was half conscious of having done something which would be considered wholly outrageous among his associates, and among gentlemen at large. The fact that Bright was his distant cousin was hardly an excuse for tripping him up even in jest, and if the matter were to be taken in earnest, Bright's superior strength would not excuse Ralston for using his

own far superior skill and quickness, in the most brutal way, and on rather slender provocation. No one but he himself, however, even knew that he had been making a great effort to cure himself of a bad habit, and that although it was now Thursday, he had taken nothing stronger than a little weak wine and water and an occasional cup of coffee since Monday afternoon. Bright could therefore have no idea of the extent to which his accusation had wounded and exasperated the sensitive man — rendered ten times more sensitive than usual by his unwonted abstention.

Ralston, however, did not enter into any such elaborate consideration of the matter as he hurried along, too much excited just then to stop and look for a cab. He was still whole-heartedly angry with Bright, and was glad that he had thrown him, be the consequences what they might. If Bright would apologize for having laid rough hands on him, Ralston would do as much — not otherwise. If the thing were mentioned, he would leave the club and frequent another to which he belonged. Nothing could be simpler.

But he had received a much more violent impression than he fancied, and he forgot many things — forgetting even for a moment where he was going. Passing an up-town hotel on his way, he entered the bar by sheer force of habit — the habit of drinking something whenever his nerves were

not quite steady. He ordered some whiskey, still thinking of Bright, and it was not until he had swallowed half of it that he realized what he was doing. With a half-suppressed oath he set down the liquor unfinished, dropped his money on the metal table and went out, more angry than ever.

Realizing that he was not exactly in a condition to talk quietly to any one, he turned into a side street, lit a strong cigar and walked more slowly for a few minutes, trying to collect his thoughts, and at last succeeding to a certain extent, aided perhaps by the tonic effect of the spoonful of alcohol he had swallowed.

The whole thing had begun in a very simple way — the gradual increase of tension from the early morning until towards evening had been produced by small incidents following upon the hasty marriage ceremony, which, as has been said, had produced a far deeper impression upon him than upon Katharine herself. The endless hours of waiting, the solitary luncheon, the waiting again, Katharine's summary dismissal of him, almost without a word of explanation — then more waiting, and Miner's tiresome questions, and the sudden call to the telephone, and stumbling against Crowdie — and all the rest of it. Small things, all of them, after the marriage itself, but able to produce at least a fit of extremely bad temper by their cumu-

lative action upon such a character. Ralston was undoubtedly a dangerous man to exasperate at five o'clock on that Thursday afternoon.

He had been summoned by Robert Lauderdale himself, and this had contributed not a little to the haste which had brought him into collision with Bright. The old gentleman had asked him to come up to his house at once; John had said that he would come immediately, but on asking a further question he found the communication closed.

It immediately struck him that Katharine had not found uncle Robert at home in the morning, that she had very possibly gone to him again in the afternoon, and that they were perhaps together at that very moment, and had agreed to send for Ralston in order to talk matters over. It was natural enough, considering his strong desire to see Katharine before the ball, and his anxiety to hear Robert Lauderdale's definite answer, upon which depended everything in the immediate present and future, that he should not have cared to waste time in exchanging civilities in the hall of the club with Bright, whom he saw almost every day, or with Crowdie, whom he detested. The rest has been explained.

Nor was it at all unnatural that the three men should all have been simultaneously deceived into believing that he had been drinking more than was

good for him. A man who is known to drink habitually can hardly get credit for being sober when he is perfectly quiet — never, when he is in the least excited. Ralston had been more than excited. He had been violent. He had disgraced himself and the club by a piece of outrageous brutality. If any one but Bright had suffered by it, there would have been a meeting of the committee within twenty-four hours, and John Ralston's name would have disappeared from the list of members forever. It was fortunate for him that Bright chanced to be his best friend.

Ralston scarcely realized how strongly the man was attached to him. Embittered as he was by being constantly regarded as the failure of the family, he could hardly believe that any one but his mother and Katharine cared what became of him. A young man who has wasted three or four years in fruitless, if not very terrible, dissipation, whose nerves are a trifle affected by habits as yet by no means incurable, and who has had the word 'failure' daily branded upon him by his discriminating relatives, easily believes that for him life is over, and that he can never redeem the time lost — for he is constantly reminded of this by persons who should know better. And if he is somewhat melancholic by nature, he is very ready to think that the future holds but two possibilities, — the love of woman so long as it may last, and an easy

death of some sort when there is no more love. That was approximately John Ralston's state of mind as he ascended the steps of Robert Lauderdale's house on that Thursday afternoon.

CHAPTER XIX.

Ralston shook himself and stamped his feet softly upon the rug as he took off his overcoat in the hall of Robert Lauderdale's house. He was conscious that he was nervous and tried to restore the balance of forces by a physical effort, but he was not very successful. The man went before him and ushered him into the same room in which Katharine had been received that morning. The windows were already shut, and several shaded lamps shed a soft light upon the bookcases, the great desk and the solid central figure of the great man. Ralston had not passed the threshold before he was conscious that Katharine was not present, as he had hoped that she might be. His excitement gave place once more to the cold sensation of something infinitely disappointing, as he took the old gentleman's hand and then sat down in a stiff, high-backed chair opposite to him — to be 'looked over,' he said to himself.

"So you're married," said Robert Lauderdale, abruptly opening the conversation.

"Then you've seen Katharine," answered the young man. "I wasn't sure you had."

"Hasn't she told you?"

"No. I was to have seen her this afternoon, but — she couldn't do more than tell me that she would talk it all over this evening."

"Oh!" ejaculated the old man. "That rather alters the case."

"How?" enquired Ralston, whose bad temper made him instinctively choose to understand as little as possible of what was said.

"Well, in this way, my dear boy. Katharine and I had a long interview this morning, and as I supposed you must have met before now, I naturally thought she had explained things to you."

"What things?" asked Ralston, doggedly.

"Oh, well! If I've got to go through the whole affair again — " The old man stopped abruptly and tapped the table with his big fingers, looking across the room at one of the lamps.

"I don't think that will be necessary," said Ralston. "If you'll tell me why you sent for me that will be quite enough."

Robert Lauderdale looked at him in some surprise, for the tone of his voice sounded unaccountably hostile.

"I didn't ask you to come for the sake of quarrelling with you, Jack," he replied.

"No. I didn't suppose so."

"But you seem to be in a confoundedly bad temper all the same," observed the old gentleman, and

his bushy eyebrows moved oddly above his bright old eyes.

"Am I? I didn't know it." Ralston sat very quietly in his chair, holding his hat on his knees, but looking steadily at Mr. Lauderdale.

The latter suddenly sniffed the air discontentedly, and frowned.

"It's those abominable cocktails you're always drinking, Jack," he said.

"I've not been drinking any," answered Ralston, momentarily forgetting the forgetfulness which had so angered him ten minutes earlier.

"Nonsense!" cried the old man, angrily. "Do you think that I'm in my dotage, Jack? It's whiskey. I can smell it!"

"Oh!" Ralston paused. "It's true — on my way here, I began to drink something and then put it down."

"Hm!" Robert Lauderdale snorted and looked at him. "It's none of my business how many cocktails you drink, I suppose — and it's natural that you should wish to celebrate the wedding day. Might drink wine, though, like a gentleman," he added audibly.

Again Ralston felt that sharp thrust of pain which a man feels under a wholly unjust accusation brought against him when he has been doing his best and has more than partially succeeded. The fiery temper — barely under control when he had entered the house — broke out again.

"If you've sent for me to lecture me on my habits, I shall go," he said, moving as though about to rise.

"I didn't," answered the old gentleman, with flashing eyes. "I asked you to come here on a matter of business — and you've come smelling of whiskey and flying into a passion at everything I say — and I tell you — pah! I can smell it here!"

He took a cigar from the table and lit it hastily. Meanwhile Ralston rose to his feet. He evidently had no intention of quarrelling with his uncle unnecessarily, but the repeated insult stung him past endurance. The old man looked up, with the cigar between his teeth, and still holding the match at the end of it. With the other hand he took a bit of paper from the table and held it out towards Ralston.

"That's what I sent for you about," he said.

Ralston turned suddenly and faced him.

"What is it?" he asked sharply.

"Take it, and see."

"If it's money, I won't touch it," Ralston answered, beginning to grow pale, for he saw that it was a cheque, and it seemed just then like a worse insult than the first.

"It's not for you. It's a matter of business. Take it!"

Ralston shifted his hat into his left hand and

took the cheque in his right, and glanced at it. It was drawn in favour of Katharine Lauderdale for one hundred thousand dollars. He laughed in the old man's face, being very angry.

"It's a curiosity, at all events," he said with contempt, laying it on the table.

"What do you mean?" cried his uncle, growing redder as Ralston turned white.

"There is no Katharine Lauderdale, in the first place," answered the young man. "The thing isn't worth the paper it's written on. If it were worth money, I'd tear it up — if it were for a million."

"Oh — would you?" The old gentleman looked at Ralston with a sort of fierce, contemptuous unbelief.

"Yes — I would. So would Katharine. I daresay she told you so."

Robert Lauderdale bit his cigar savagely. It was a little too much to be browbeaten by a mere boy, when he had been used to commanding all his life. Whether he understood Ralston, or whether he completely lost his head, was never clear to either of them, then, or afterwards. He took a fresh cheque and filled it in carefully. His face was scarlet now, and his sandy eyebrows were knitted angrily together. When he had done, he scrutinized the order closely, and then laid it upon the end of the desk under Ralston's eyes.

'Pay to the order of John Ralston one million dollars, Robert Lauderdale.'

Ralston glanced at the writing without touching the paper, and involuntarily his eyes were fascinated by it for a moment. There was nothing wrong about the cheque this time.

In the instant during which he looked at it, as it lay there, the temptation to take it was hardly perceptible to him. He knew it was real, and yet it did not look real. In the progress of his increasing anger there was a momentary pause. The exceeding magnitude of the figure arrested his attention and diverted his thoughts. He had never seen a cheque for a million of dollars before, and he could not help looking at it, for its own sake.

"That's a curiosity, too," he said, almost unconsciously. "I never saw one."

A moment later he set down his hat, took the slip of paper and tore it across, doubled it and tore it again, and mechanically looked for the waste-paper basket. Robert Lauderdale watched him, not without an anxiety of which he was ashamed, for he had realized the stupendous risk into which his anger had led him as soon as he had laid the cheque on the desk, but had been too proud to take it back. He would not have been Robert the Rich if he had often been tempted to such folly, but the young man's manner had exasperated him beyond measure.

"That was a million of dollars," he said, in an odd voice, as the shreds fell into the basket.

"I suppose so," answered Ralston, with a sneer, as he took his hat again. "You could have drawn it for fifty millions, I daresay, if you had chosen. It's lucky you do that sort of thing in the family."

"You're either tipsy — or you're a better man than I took you for," said Robert Lauderdale, slowly regaining his composure.

"You've suggested already that I am probably drunk," answered Ralston, brutally. "I'll leave you to consider the matter. Good evening."

He went towards the door. Old Lauderdale looked after him a moment and then rose, heavily, as big old men do.

"Jack! Come back! Don't be a fool, my boy!"

"I'm not," replied the young man. "The wisest thing I can do is to go — and I'm going." He laid hold of the handle of the door. "It's of no use for me to stay," he said. "We shall come to blows if this goes on."

His uncle came towards him as he stood there. Hamilton Bright was more like him in size and figure than any of the other Lauderdales.

"I don't want you to go just yet, Jack," he said, more kindly than he had spoken yet, and laying his hand on Ralston's arm very much as Bright had done in the club.

Ralston shrank from his touch, not because he

was in the least afraid of being violent with an old man, but because the mere thought of such a thing offended his sense of honour, and the position in which the two were standing reminded him of what had happened but a short time previously.

"Just tell me one thing, my dear boy," began Robert Lauderdale, whose short fits of anger were always succeeded immediately by a burst of sunshiny good humour. "I want to know what induced you to go and marry Katharine in that way?"

Ralston drew back still further, trying to avoid his touch. It was utterly impossible for him to answer that he had very reluctantly yielded to Katharine's own entreaties. Nor was his anger by any means as transient as the old man's.

"I entirely refuse to discuss the matter," he said, and paused. "Do you want a plain statement?" he asked, a moment later. "Very well. It was understood that Katharine was to tell you about the marriage, and she has done so. You're the head of the family, and you have a right to know. If I ever had any intention of asking anything of you, it certainly wasn't money. And I've asked nothing. Possibly, just now, you meant to be generous. It struck me in rather a different light. I thought it was pretty clear, in the first place, that you took me for the sort of man who would be willing to live on his wife's money, if

she had any. If you meant to give her the money, there was no reason for putting the cheque into my hands — nor for writing a cheque at all. You could, and you naturally should, have written a note to Beman to place the sum to her credit. That was a mere comedy, to see what I would do — to try me, as I suppose you said to yourself. Thank you. I never offered myself to be a subject for your experiments. As for the cheque for a million — that was pure farce. You were so angry that you didn't know what you were doing, and then your fright — yes, your fright — calmed you again. But there's no harm done. You saw me throw it into the waste-paper basket. That's all, I think. As you seem to think I'm not sober, you may as well let me take myself off. But if I'm drunk — well, don't try any of those silly experiments on men who aren't. You'll get caught, and a million is rather a high price to pay for seeing a man's expression of face change. Good night — let me go, please."

During this long tirade Robert Lauderdale had walked up and down before him with short, heavy steps, uttering occasional ejaculations, but at the last words he took hold of Ralston's arm again — rather roughly this time.

"You're an insolent young vagabond!" he cried, breaking into a fresh fit of anger. "You're insulting me in my own house."

"You've been insulting me in your own house for the last quarter of an hour," retorted Ralston.

"And you're throwing away the last chance you'll ever get from me —"

"It wasn't much of a chance — for a gentleman," sneered the young man, interrupting him.

"Confound it! Can't you let me speak? I say —" He hesitated, losing the thread of his intended speech in his anger.

"You don't seem to have anything especial to say, except in the way of abuse, and there's no reason at all why I should listen to that sort of thing. I'm not your son, and I'm not your butler — I'm thankful I'm not your dog!"

"John!" roared the old man, shaking him by the arm. "Be silent, sir! I won't submit to such language!"

"What right have you to tell me what I shall submit to, or not submit to? Because you're a sort of distant relation, I suppose, and have got into the habit of lording it over the whole tribe — who would lick the heels of your boots for your money — every one of them, except my mother and Katharine and me. Don't tell me what I'm to submit to —"

"I didn't say you!" shouted old Lauderdale. "I said that I wouldn't hear such language from you — you're drunk, John Ralston — you're mad drunk."

"Then you'll have to listen to my ravings just as long as you force me to stay under your roof," answered Ralston, almost trembling with rage. "If you keep me here, I shall tell you just what I think of you — "

"By the Eternal — this is too much — you young — puppy! You graceless, ungrateful — "

"I should really like to know what I'm to be grateful to you for," said Ralston, feeling that his hands were growing icy cold. "You've never done anything for me or mine in your life — as you know. You'd much better let me go. You'll regret it if you don't."

"And you dare to threaten me, too — I tell you — I'll make you — " His words choked him, and again he shook Ralston's arm violently.

"You won't make me forget that you're three times my age, at all events," answered the young man. "But unless you're very careful during the next ten minutes you'll have a fit of apoplexy. You'd much better let me go away. This sort of thing isn't good for a man of your age — and it's not particularly dignified either. You'd realize it if you could see yourself and hear yourself — oh! take care, please! That's my hat."

Robert Lauderdale's fury had boiled over at last and expressed itself in a very violent gesture, not intended for a blow, but very like one, and utterly destructive to Ralston's hat, which rolled shapeless

upon the polished wooden floor. The young man stooped as he spoke the last words, and picked it up.

"Oh, I say, Jack! I didn't mean to do that, my boy!" said the old gentleman, with that absurdly foolish change of tone which generally comes into the voice when one in anger has accidentally broken something.

"No — I daresay not," answered Ralston, coldly.

Without so much as a glance at old Lauderdale, he quickly opened the door and left the room, as he would have done some minutes earlier if his uncle had not held him by the arm. The library was downstairs, and he was out of the house before Lauderdale had sufficiently recovered from his surprise to call him back.

That, indeed, would have been quite useless, for Ralston would not have turned his head. He had never been able to understand how a man could be in a passion at one moment and brimming with good nature at the next, for his own moods were enduring, passionate and brooding.

It had all been very serious to him, much more so than to the old gentleman, though the latter had been by far the more noisy of the two in his anger. If he had been able to reflect, he might have soon come to the conclusion that the violent scene had been the result of a misunderstanding, in the first instance, and secondly, of Robert Lauderdale's lack

of wisdom in trying to make him take money for Katharine. In the course of time he would have condoned the latter offence and forgiven the former, but just now both seemed very hard to bear.

After being exceptionally abstemious, — and he alone knew at what a cost in the way of constant self-control, — he had been accused twice within an hour of being drunk. And as though that were not enough, with all the other matters which had combined to affect his temper on that day, Robert Lauderdale had first tried to make him act dishonourably, as Ralston thought, or at least in an unmanly way, and had then tried to make a fool of him with the cheque for a million. He almost wished that he could have kept the latter twenty-four hours for the sake of frightening the old man into his senses. It would have been a fair act of retaliation, he thought, though he would not in reality have stooped to do it.

It was quite dark when he came out upon Fifty-ninth Street, and the weather was foggy and threatening, though it was not cold. He had forgotten his overcoat in his hurry to get away, and did not notice even now that he was without it. Half mechanically he had pushed his high hat into some sort of shape and put it on, and had already forgotten that it was not in its normal condition. His face was very pale, and his eyes were bright. Without thinking of the direction he was taking,

he turned into Fifth Avenue by force of habit. As he walked along, several men who knew him passed him, walking up from their clubs to dress for dinner. They most of them nodded, smiled rather oddly and went on. He noticed nothing strange in their behaviour, being very much absorbed in his own unpleasant reflections, but most of them were under the impression, from the glimpse they had of him under the vivid electric light, that he was very much the worse for drink, and that he had lost his overcoat and had his hat smashed in some encounter with a rough or roughs unknown. One or two of his rows had remained famous. But he was well known, too, for his power of walking straight and of taking care of himself, even when he was very far gone, and nobody who met him ventured to offer him any assistance. On the other hand, no one would have believed that he was perfectly sober, and that his hat had been destroyed by no less a person than the great Robert Lauderdale himself.

He certainly deserved much more pity than he got that day. But good and bad luck run in streaks, as the winds blow across land-locked waters, and it is not easy to get across from one to the other. Ralston was drifting in a current of circumstances from which he could not escape, being what he was, a man with an irritable temper, more inclined to resent the present than to prepare

the future. Presently he turned eastwards out of Fifth Avenue. He remembered afterwards that it must have been somewhere near Forty-second Street, for he had a definite impression of having lately passed the great black wall of the old reservoir. He did not know why he turned just there, and he was probably impelled to do so by some slight hindrance at the crossing he had reached. At all events, he was sure of having walked at least a mile since he had left Robert Lauderdale's house.

The cross street was very dark compared with the Avenue he had left. He stopped to light a cigar, in the vague hope that it might help him to think, for he knew very well that he must go home before long and dress for a dinner party, and then go on to the great Assembly ball at which he was to meet Katharine. It struck him as he thought of the meeting that he would have much more to tell her about their uncle Robert than she could possibly have to relate of her own experience. He lit his cigar very carefully. Anger had to some extent the effect of making him deliberate and precise in his small actions. He held the lighted taper to the end of his cigar several seconds, and then dropped it. It had dazzled him, so that for the moment the street seemed to be quite black in front of him. He walked on boldly, suspecting nothing, and a moment later he fell to his full

length upon a heap of building material piled upon the pavement.

It is worth remarking, for the sake of those who take an interest in tracing the relations of cause and effect, that this was the first, the last and the only real accident which happened to John Ralston on that day, and it was not a very serious one, nor, unfortunately, a very unfrequent one in the streets of New York. But it happened to him, as small accidents so often do, at an hour which gave it an especial importance.

He lay stunned as he had fallen for more than a minute, and when he came to himself he discovered that he had struck his head. The brim of his already much injured hat had saved him from a wound; but the blow had been a violent one, and though he got upon his feet almost immediately and assured himself that he was not really injured, yet, when he had got beyond the obstacle over which he had stumbled, he found it impossible to recollect which way he should go in order to get home. The slight concussion of the brain had temporarily disturbed the sense of direction, a phenomenon not at all uncommon after receiving a violent blow on the head, as many hard riders and hunting men are well aware. But it was new to Ralston, and he began to think that he was losing his mind. He stopped under a gas-lamp and looked at his watch, by way of testing his sanity.

It was half past six, and the watch was going. He immediately began a mental calculation to ascertain whether he had been unconscious for any length of time. He remembered that it had been after five o'clock when he had been called to the telephone at the club. His struggle with Bright had kept him some minutes longer, he had walked to Robert Lauderdale's, and his interview had lasted nearly half an hour, and on recalling what he had done since then he had that distinct impression of having lately seen the reservoir, of which mention has already been made.

He walked on like a man in a dream, and more than half believing that he was really dreaming. He was going eastwards, as he had been going when he had entered the street, but he found it impossible to understand which way his face was turned. He came to Madison Avenue, and knew it at once, recognizing the houses, but though he stood still several minutes at the corner, he could not distinguish which was up town and which down town. He believed that if he could have seen the stars he could have found his way, but the familiar buildings, recognizable in all their features to his practised eye even in the uncertain gaslight, conveyed to him no idea of direction, and the sky was overcast. In despair, at last, he continued in the direction in which he had been going. If he was crossing the avenue he must

surely strike the water, whether he went forwards or backwards, and he was positive that he should know the East River from the North River, even on the darkest night, by the look of the piers. But to all intents and purposes, though he knew where he was, he was lost, being deprived of the sense of direction.

The confusion increased with the darkness of the next street he traversed, and to his surprise the avenue beyond that did not seem familiar. It was Park Avenue where it is tunnelled along its length for the horse-cars which go to the Central Station. It was very dark, but in a moment he again recognized the houses. By sheer instinct he turned to the right, trusting to luck and giving up all hope of finding his way by any process of reasoning. The darkness, the blow he had received when he had fallen and all that had gone before, combined with the cold he felt, deadened his senses still more.

He noticed for the first time that his overcoat was gone, and he wondered vaguely whether it had been stolen from him when he had fallen. In that case he must have been unconscious longer than he had imagined. He felt for his watch, though he had looked at it a few moments previously. It was in his pocket as well as his pocket-book and some small change. He felt comforted at finding that he had money about him, and wished he might come

across a stray cab. Several passed him, but he could see by the lamplight that there were people in them, dressed for dinner. It was growing late, since they were already going to their dinner-parties. He felt very cold, and suddenly the flakes of snow began to fall thick and fast in his face. The weather had changed in half an hour, and a blizzard was coming. He shivered and trudged on, not knowing whither. He walked faster and faster, as men generally do when they have lost their way, and he turned in many directions, losing himself more completely at every new attempt, yet walking ever more rapidly, pursued by the nervous consciousness that he should be dressing for dinner and that there was no time to be lost. He did not feel dizzy nor weak, but he was utterly confused, and began to be unconscious of the distance he was traversing and of the time as it passed.

All at once he came upon a vast, dim square full of small trees. At first he thought he was in Gramercy Park, but the size of the place soon told him that he was mistaken. By this time it was snowing heavily and the pavements were already white. He pulled up the collar of his frock coat and hid his right hand in the front of it, between the buttons, blowing into his left at the same time, for both were freezing. He stared up at the first corner gas-lamp he came to, and read without

difficulty the name in black letters. He was in Tompkins Square.

He had been there once or twice in his life, and had been struck by the great, quiet, open place, and he understood once more where he was, and looked at his watch. It was nearly ten o'clock. He rubbed his eyes, and then rubbed the snow-flakes off the glass, for they fell so fast that he could not hold it to the light a moment before one of them fell into the open case. He had been wandering for nearly three hours, dinnerless, in the snow, and he suddenly felt numb and hungry and thirsty all at once. But at the same time, as though by magic, the sense of locality and direction returned. He put his watch into his pocket again, stamped the wet snow from his shoes and struck resolutely westward. He knew how hopeless it was to expect to find a carriage of any sort in that poor quarter of the city. Oddly enough, the first thing that struck him was the absurdity of his own conduct in not once asking his way, for he was certain that he had met many hundreds of people during those hours of wandering. He marched on through the snow, perfectly satisfied at having recovered his senses, though he now for the first time felt a severe pain in his head.

Before long he reached a horse-car track and waited for the car to come up, without the least

hesitation as to its direction. He got on without difficulty, though he noticed that the conductor looked at him keenly and seemed inclined to help him. He paid his five cents and sat down in the corner away from the door. It was pleasantly warm by contrast with the weather he had been facing for hours, and the straw under his feet seemed deliciously comfortable. He remembered being surprised at finding himself so tired, and at the pain in his head. There was one other man in the car, who stood near the door talking with the conductor. He was a short man, very broad in the shoulders and thick about the neck, but not at all fat, as Ralston noticed, being a judge of athletes. This man wore an overcoat with a superb sable collar, and a gorgeous gold chain was stretched across the broad expanse of his waistcoat. He was perfectly clean shaven, and looked as though he might be a successful prize fighter. At this point in his observation John Ralston fell asleep.

He had two more intervals of consciousness.

He had gone to sleep in the horse-car. He woke to find himself fighting the man with the fur coat and the chain, out under the falling snow, with half a dozen horse-car drivers and conductors making a ring, each with a lantern. He thought he remembered seeing a red streak on the face of his adversary. A moment later

he saw a vivid flash of light, and then he was unconscious again.

When he opened his eyes once more he looked into his mother's face, and he saw an expression there which he never forgot as long as he lived.

CHAPTER XX.

KATHARINE looked in vain for Ralston near the door of the ball-room that night, as she entered with her mother, passed up to curtsy to one of the ladies whose turn it was to receive and slowly crossed the polished floor to the other side. He was nowhere to be seen, and immediately she felt a little chill of apprehension, as though something had warned her that he was in trouble. The sensation was merely the result of her disappointment. Hitherto, even to that very afternoon, he had always shown himself to be the most scrupulously exact and punctual man of her acquaintance, and it was natural enough that the fact of his not appearing at such an important juncture as the present should seem very strange. Katharine, however, attributed what she felt to a presentiment of evil, and afterwards remembered it as though it had been something like a supernatural warning.

When she had assured herself that he was really not at the ball, her first impulse was to ask every one she met if he had been seen, and as that was impossible, she looked about for some member of the family who might enlighten her and of whom

she might ask questions without exciting curiosity. It was not an easy matter, however, to find just such a person as should fulfil the requirements of the case. Hamilton Bright or Frank Miner would have answered her purpose, and it was just possible that one or both of them might appear at a later hour, though neither of them were men who danced. Crowdie would come, of course, with his wife, but she felt that she could not ask him questions about Ralston, and Hester would hardly be likely to know anything of the latter's movements.

It was quite out of the question for Katharine to sit in a quiet corner under one of the galleries, and watch the door, as a cat watches the hole from which she expects a mouse to appear. She was too much surrounded by the tribe of high-collared, broad-tied, smooth-faced, empty-headed, and very young men who, in an American ball-room, make it more or less their business to inflict their company upon the most beautiful young girl present at any one time. Older men would often be only too glad to talk with her, and she would prefer them to her bevy of half-fledged admirers, but the older man naturally shrinks from intruding himself amongst a circle of very young people, and systematically keeps away. On the whole, too, the young girls enjoy themselves exceedingly well and do not complain of their following.

At last, however, Katharine determined to speak

to her mother. She had seen the latter in close conversation with Crowdie. That was natural enough. Crowdie thought more of beauty than of any other gift, and if Mrs. Lauderdale had been a doll, which she was not, he would always have spent half an hour with her if he could, merely for the sake of studying her face. She was very beautiful to-night, and there was no fear of a repetition of the scene which had occurred by the fireplace in Clinton Place on Monday night. It seemed as though she had recalled the dazzling freshness of other days — not long past, it is true — by an act of will, determined to be supreme to the very end. She knew it, too. She was conscious that the lights were exactly what they should be, that the temperature was perfect, that her gown could not fit her better and that she had arrived feeling fresh and rested. Charlotte's visit had done her good, also, for Charlotte had made herself very charming on that afternoon, as will be remembered by those who have had the patience to follow the minor events of the long day. Even her husband had been more than usually unbending and agreeable at dinner, and it was probably her appearance which had produced that effect on him. Like most very strong and masculine men, whatever be their characters, he was very really affected by woman's beauty. For some time he had silently regretted the change in his wife's appearance, and this even-

ing he had noticed the return of that brilliancy which had attracted him long ago. He had even kissed her before his daughter, when he had put on her cloak for her, which was a very rare occurrence. Crowdie had seen Mrs. Lauderdale as soon as he had left Hester to her first partner and had been at liberty to wander after his own devices, and had immediately gone to her. Katharine had observed this, for she had good eyes and few things within her range of vision escaped her. Naturally enough, too, she had glanced at her mother more than once and had seen that the latter was evidently much interested by some story which Crowdie was telling. Her own mind being entirely occupied with Ralston, it was not surprising that she should imagine that they were talking of him.

She watched her opportunity, and when Crowdie at last left her mother's side, went to her immediately. They were a wonderful pair as they stood together for a few moments, and many people watched them. Mrs. Lauderdale, who was especially conscious of the admiration she was receiving that night, felt so vain of herself that she did not attempt to avoid the comparison, but drew herself up proudly to her great height in the full view of every one, and as though remembering and repenting of the bitter envy she had felt of Katharine's youth even as lately as the previous day, she looked down calmly and lovingly into the girl's face.

Katharine was not in the least aware that any one was looking at them, nor did she imagine any comparison possible between her mother and herself. Her faults of character certainly did not lie in the direction of personal vanity. Many people, too, thought that she was not looking her best, as the phrase goes, on that evening, while others said that she had never looked as well before. She was transparently pale, with that fresh pallor which is not unbecoming in youth and health when it is natural, or the result of an emotion. The whiteness of her face made her deep grey eyes seem larger and deeper than ever, and the broad, dark eyebrows gave a look of power to the features, which was striking in one so young. Passion, anxiety, the alternations of hope and fear, even the sense of unwonted responsibility, may all enhance beauty when they are of short duration, though in time they must destroy it, or modify its nature, spiritualizing or materializing it, according to the objects and reasons from which they proceed. The beauty of Napoleon's death mask is very different from that of Goethe's, yet both, perhaps, at widely different ages, approached as nearly to perfection of feature as humanity ever can.

"Well, child, have you come back to me?" asked Mrs. Lauderdale, with a smile.

There was nothing affected in her manner, for she had too long been first, yet she knew that her

smile was not lost on others — she could feel that the eyes of many were on her, and she had a right to be as handsome as she could. Even Katharine was struck by the wonderful return of youth.

"You're perfectly beautiful to-night, mother!" she exclaimed, in genuine admiration.

There was something in the whole-hearted, spontaneous expression of approval from her own daughter which did more to assure the elder woman of her appearance than all Crowdie's compliments could have done. Katharine rarely said such things.

"You're not at all ugly yourself to-night, my dear!" laughed Mrs. Lauderdale. "You're a little pale — but it's very becoming. What's the matter? Are you out of breath? Have you been dancing too long?"

"I didn't know that I was pale," answered Katharine. "No, I'm not out of breath — nor anything. I just came over to you because I saw you were alone for a moment. By the bye, mother, have you seen Jack anywhere?"

It was not very well done, and it was quite clear that she had crossed the big ball-room solely for the purpose of asking the question. Mrs. Lauderdale hesitated an instant before giving any answer, and she had a puzzled expression.

"No," she said, at last. "I've not seen him. I don't believe he's here. In fact —" she was a

truthful woman — "in fact, I'm quite sure he's not. Did you expect him?"

"Of course," answered Katharine, in a low voice. "He always comes."

She knew her mother's face very well, and was at once convinced that she had been right in supposing that Crowdie had been speaking of Ralston. She saw the painter at some distance, and tried to catch his glance and bring him to her, but he suddenly turned away and went off in the opposite direction. She reflected that Crowdie did not pass for a discreet or reticent person, and that if there were anything especial to be told he had doubtless confided it to his wife before coming to the ball. She looked about for Hester, but could not see her at first, neither could she discover Bright or Miner in the moving crowd. She stood quietly by her mother for a time, glad to escape momentarily from her usual retinue of beardless young dandies. Mrs. Lauderdale still seemed to hesitate as to whether she should say any more. The story Crowdie had told her was a very strange one, she thought, and she herself doubted the accuracy of the details. And he had exacted a sort of promise of secrecy from her, which, in her experience, very generally meant that a part, or the whole of what was told, might be untrue. Nevertheless, she had never thought that the painter was a spiteful person. She was puzzled, therefore, but she very soon re-

solved that she should tell Katharine nothing, which was, after all, the wisest plan.

Just then a tall, lean man made his way up to her and bowed rather stiffly. He was powerfully made, and moved like a person more accustomed to motion than to rest. He had a weather-beaten, kindly face, clean shaven, thin and bony. His features were decidedly ugly, though by no means repulsive. His hair was thick and iron grey, and he was about fifty years of age. Mrs. Lauderdale gave him her hand, and seemed glad to see him.

"Mr. Griggs — my daughter," she said, introducing him to Katharine, who had immediately recognized him, for she had seen him at a distance on the previous evening at the Thirlwalls' dance.

Paul Griggs bowed again in his stiff, rather foreign way, and Katharine smiled and bent her head a little. She had always wished she might meet him, for she had read some of his books and liked them, and he was reported to have led a very strange life, and to have been everywhere.

"I saw you talking to Mrs. Crowdie," said Mrs. Lauderdale. "She's charming, isn't she?"

"Very," answered Mr. Griggs, in a deep, manly voice, but without any special emphasis. "Very," he repeated vaguely. "She was a mere girl — not out yet — when I was last at home," he added, suddenly showing some interest.

"By the bye, where is she?" asked Katharine,

in the momentary pause which followed. "I was looking for her."

"Over there," replied Mr. Griggs, nodding almost imperceptibly in the direction he meant to indicate. As he was over six feet in height, and could see over the heads of most of the people, Katharine had not gained any very accurate information.

"You can see her," he continued in explanation. "She's sitting up among the frumps; she's looking for her husband, and there's a man with yellow hair talking to her — it's her brother — over there between the first and second windows from the end where the music is. Do you make her out?"

"Yes. How can you tell that she is looking for her husband at this distance?" Katharine laughed.

"By her eyes," answered Mr. Griggs. "She's in love with him, you know — and she's anxious about him for some reason or other. But I believe he's all right now. I used to know him very well in Paris once upon a time. Clever fellow, but he had — oh, well, it's nobody's business. What a beautiful ball it is, Mrs. Lauderdale —"

"What did Mr. Crowdie have in Paris?" asked Katharine, with sudden interest, and interrupting him.

"Oh — he was subject to bad colds in winter," answered Mr. Griggs, coolly. "Lungs affected, I

believe — or something of that sort. As I was saying, Mrs. Lauderdale, this is a vast improvement on the dances they used to have in New York when I was young. That was long before your time, though I daresay your husband can remember them."

And he went on speaking, evidently making conversation of a most unprofitable kind in the most cold-blooded and cynical manner, by sheer force of habit, as people who have the manners of the world without its interests often do, until something strikes them.

A young man, whose small head seemed to have just been squeezed through the cylinder of enamelled linen on which it rested as on a pedestal, came up to Katharine and asked her for a dance. She went away on his arm. After a couple of turns, she made him stop close to Hester Crowdie.

"Thanks," she said, nodding to her partner. "I want to speak to my cousin. You don't mind — do you? I'll give you the rest of the dance some other time."

And without waiting for his answer, she stepped upon the low platform which ran round the ball-room, and took the vacant seat by Hester's side. Hamilton Bright, who had only been exchanging a word with his sister when Griggs had caught sight of him, was gone, and she was momentarily alone.

"Hester," began Katharine, "where is Jack Ralston? I'm perfectly sure your husband knows, and has told you, and I know that he has told my mother, from the way she spoke—"

"How did you guess that?" asked Mrs. Crowdie, starting a little at the first words. "But I'm sorry if he has spoken to your mother about it—" She stopped suddenly, feeling that she had made a mistake.

She was very nervous herself that evening, and as Griggs had said, she was anxious about her husband. There was no real foundation for her anxiety, but since her recent experience, she was very easily frightened. Crowdie had spoken excitedly to her about Ralston's conduct at the club that afternoon, and she had fancied that there was something unusual in his look.

"Oh, Hester, what is it?" asked Katharine, bending nearer to her and laying a hand on hers.

"Don't look so awfully frightened, dear!" Hester smiled, but not very naturally. "It's nothing very serious. In fact, I believe it's only that Walter saw him at the club late this afternoon and got the idea that he wasn't—quite well."

"Not well? Is he ill? Where is he? At home?" Katharine asked the questions all in a breath, with no suspicion that Hester had softened the truth almost altogether into something else.

"I suppose he's at home, since he's not here,"

answered Mrs. Crowdie, wishing that she had said so at first and had said nothing more.

"Oh, Hester! What is it? I know it's something dreadful!" cried Katharine. "I shall go and ask Mr. Crowdie if you won't tell me."

"Don't!" exclaimed Mrs. Crowdie, so quickly and so loudly that the people near her turned to see what was the matter.

"You've told me, now — he must be very ill, or you wouldn't speak like that!" Katharine's lips began to turn white, and she half rose from her seat.

Mrs. Crowdie drew her back again very gently.

"No, dear — no, I assure — I give you my word it's not that, dear — oh, I'm so sorry I said anything!" Katharine yielded, and resumed her seat.

"Hester, what is it?" she asked very gravely for the third time. "You're my best friend — the only friend I have besides him. If it's anything bad, I'd much rather hear it from you. But I can't stand this suspense. I shall ask everybody until somebody tells me the truth."

Mrs. Crowdie seemed to reflect for a moment before answering, but even while she was thinking of what she should say, her passionate eyes sought for her husband's pale face in the crowd — the pale face and the red lips that so many women thought repulsive.

"Dear," she said at last, "it's foolish to make

such a fuss and to frighten you. That sort of thing has happened to almost all men at one time or another — really, you know! You mustn't blame Jack too much —"

"For what? For what? Speak, Hester! Don't try to —"

"Katharine darling, Walter says that Jack was — well — you know — just a little far gone — and they had some trouble with him at the club. I don't know — it seems that my brother tried to hold him for some reason or other — it's not quite clear — and Jack threw Ham down, there in the hall of the club, before a lot of people — Katharine dearest, I'm so sorry I spoke!"

Katharine was leaning back against the cushion, her hands folded together, and her face set like a mask; but she said nothing, and scarcely seemed to be listening, though she heard every word.

"Of course, dear," continued Mrs. Crowdie, "I know how you love him — but you mustn't think any the worse of him for this. Ham just told me it wasn't — well — it wasn't as bad as Walter made out, and he was very angry with Walter for telling me — as though he would keep anything from me!"

She stopped again, being much more inclined to talk of Crowdie than of Ralston, and to defend his indiscretion. Katharine did not move nor change her position, and her eyes looked straight

before her, though it was clear that they saw nothing.

"I'm glad it was you who told me," she said in a low, monotonous tone.

"So am I," answered her friend, sympathetically. "And I'm sure it's not half as bad as they —"

"They all know it," continued Katharine, not heeding her. "I can see it in their eyes when they look at me."

"Nonsense, Katharine — nobody but Walter and Ham —"

"Your husband told my mother, too. She spoke very oddly. He's been telling every one. Why does he want to make trouble? Does he hate Jack so?"

"Hate him? No, indeed! I think he's rather fond of him —"

"It's a very treacherous sort of fondness, then," answered Katharine, with a bitter little laugh, and changing her position at last, so that she looked into her friend's face.

"Katharine!" exclaimed Hester. "How can you talk like that — telling me that Walter is treacherous —"

"Oh — you mustn't mind what I say — I'm a little upset — I didn't mean to hurt you, dear."

Katharine rose, and without another word she left her friend and began to go up the side

of the room alone, looking for some one as she went. In a moment one of her numerous young adorers was by her side. He had seen her talking to Mrs. Crowdie, and had watched his opportunity.

"No," said Katharine, absently, and without looking at him. "I don't want to dance, thanks. I want to find my cousin, Hamilton Bright. Have you seen him?"

"Oh — ah — yes!" answered the young man, with an imitation of the advanced English manner of twenty years ago, which seems to have become the ideal of our gilded youth of to-day. "He's in the corner under the balcony — he's been — er — rather leathering into Crowdie — you know — er — for talking about Jack Ralston's last, all over the place — I daresay you've heard of it, Miss Lauderdale — being — er — a cousin of your own, too. No end game, that Ralston chap!"

Katharine lost her temper suddenly. She stopped and looked the young dandy in the eyes. He never forgot the look of hers, nor the paleness of her lips as she spoke.

"You're rather young to speak like that of older men, Mr. Van De Water," she said.

She coolly turned her back on the annihilated youth and walked away from him alone, almost as surprised at what she had done as he was. He, poor boy, got very red in the face, stood still,

helped himself into countenance by sticking a single glass in his eye and then went in search of his dearest friend, the man who had just discovered that extraordinary tailor in New Burlington Street, you know.

Katharine had been half stunned by what Hester Crowdie had told her, which she felt instinctively was not more than a moiety of the truth. She had barely recovered her self-possession when she was met by what rang like an insult in her ears. It was no wonder that her blood boiled. Without looking to the right or to the left, she went forward till she was under the great balcony, and there, by one of the pillars, she came upon Bright and Crowdie talking together in low, excited tones.

Bright's big shoulders slowly heaved as in his anger he took about twice as much breath as he needed into his lungs at every sentence. His fresh, pink face was red, and his bright blue eyes flashed visibly. What the young dandy had said was evidently true. He was still 'leathering into' Crowdie with all his might, which was considerable.

Crowdie, perfectly cool and collected, leaned against the wooden pillar with a disagreeable sneer on his red mouth. One hand was in his pocket; the other hung by his side, and his fingers quietly tapped a little measure upon the fluted column. Almost every one has that trick of tapping upon

something in moments of anxiety or uncertainty, but the way in which it is done is very characteristic of the individual. Crowdie's pointed white fingers did it delicately, drawing back lightly from contact with the wood, as a woman's might, or as though he were playing upon a fine instrument.

"It's just like you, Walter," Bright was saying, "to go about telling the thing to all the women. Didn't I tell you this afternoon that I was the principal person concerned, that it was my business and not yours and that if I wished it kept quiet, nobody need tell? And you said yourself that you hoped Hester might not hear it, and then the very first thing I find is that you've told her and cousin Emma and probably Katharine herself—"

"No, I've not told Katharine," said Crowdie, calmly. "I shan't, because she loves him. The Lord knows why! Drunken beast! I shall leave the club myself, since he's not to be turned out—"

Crowdie stopped suddenly, for he was more timid than most men, and his face plainly expressed fear at that moment—but not of Hamilton Bright. Katharine Lauderdale was looking at him over Bright's shoulder and had plainly heard what he had said. A man's fear of woman under certain circumstances exceeds his utmost possible fear of man. The painter knew at once that he had accidentally done Katharine something like a mortal injury. He felt as a man must feel who has acci-

dentally shot some one while playing with a loaded pistol.

As for Katharine, this was the third blow she had received within five minutes. The fact that she was in a measure prepared for it had not diminished its force. It had the effect, however, of quenching her rising anger instead of further inflaming it, as young Van De Water's foolish remarks had done. She began to feel that she had a real calamity to face — something against which mere anger would have no effect. She heard every word Crowdie said, and each struck her with cruel precision in the same aching spot. But she drew herself up proudly as she came between the two men. There was something almost queenly in the quiet dignity with which she affected to ignore what she had heard, even trying to give her white lips the shadow of a civil smile as she spoke.

"Mr. Crowdie, I wish to speak to Hamilton a moment — you don't mind, do you?"

Crowdie looked at her with undisguised amazement and admiration. He uttered some polite but half inaudible words and moved away, glad, perhaps, to get out of the sphere of Bright's invective. Bright understood very well that Katharine had heard, and admired her calmness almost as much as Crowdie did, though he did not know as much as the latter concerning Katharine's relations with

Ralston. Hester Crowdie, who told her husband everything, had told him most of what Katharine had confided to her, not considering it a betrayal of confidence, because she trusted him implicitly. No day of disenchantment had yet come for her.

"Won't you come and sit down?" asked Bright, rather anxiously. "There's a corner there."

"Yes," said Katharine, moving in the direction of the vacant seats.

"I'm afraid you heard what that brute said," Bright remarked before they had reached the place. "If I'd seen you coming—"

"It wouldn't have made any difference," Katharine answered. Then they sat down side by side. "It's much too serious a matter to be angry about," she continued, settling herself and looking at his face, and feeling that it was a relief to see a pair of honest blue eyes at last. "That's why I come to you. It happened to you, it seems. Everybody is talking about it, and I have some right to know—" She hesitated and then continued. "He's a near relation and all that, of course, and whatever he does makes a difference to us all—my mother has heard, too—I'm sure Mr. Crowdie told her. Didn't he?"

"I believe so," answered Bright. "He's just like a—oh, well! I'll swear at him when I'm alone."

"I'm glad you're angry with him," said Katha-

rine, and her eyes flashed a little. "It's so mean! But that's not the question. I want to know from your own lips what happened — and why he's not here. I have a right to know because — because we were going to dance the cotillion together — and besides — "

She hesitated again, and stopped altogether this time.

"It's very natural, I'm sure," said Bright, who was not the type of men who seek confidences. "Crowdie has made it all out much worse than it was. He's a — I mean — I wish I'd met him when I was driving cattle in the Nacimiento Valley!"

Katharine had never seen Bright so angry before, and the sight was very soothing and comforting to her. She fully concurred in Bright's last-expressed wish.

"You're Jack's best friend, aren't you?" she asked.

"Oh, well — a friend — he always says he hasn't any. But I daresay I'd do as much for him as most of them, though, if I had to. I always liked the fellow for his dash, and we generally get on very well together. He's just a trifle lively sometimes, and he doesn't go well on the curb when he's had — when he's too lively — "

"Why don't you say when he drinks?" asked Katharine, biting on the words, as it were, though she forced herself to say them.

"Well, he doesn't drink exactly," said Bright. "He's got an awfully strong head and a cast-iron constitution, but he's a queer chap. He gets melancholy, and thinks he's a failure and tries to cheer himself with cocktails. And then, you see, having such a nerve, he doesn't know exactly how many he takes; and there's a limit, of course — and the last one does the trick. Then he won't take anything to speak of for days together. He got a little too much on board last Monday — but that was excusable, and I hadn't seen him that way for a long time. I daresay you heard of it? He saved a boy's life between a lot of carts and horse-cars, and got a bad fall; and then, quite naturally — just as I should have done myself — he swallowed a big dose of something, and it went to his head. But he went straight home in a cab, so I suppose it was all right. It was a pretty brave thing he did — talk of baseball! It was one of the smartest bits of fielding I ever saw — the way he caught up the little chap, and the dog and the perambulator — forgot nothing, though it was a close shave. Oh — he's brave enough! It's a pity he can't find anything to do."

"Monday," repeated Katharine, thoughtfully. "Yes — I heard about it. Go on, please, Ham — about to-day. I want to hear everything there is."

"Oh — Crowdie talks like a fool about it. I suppose Jack was a little depressed, or something,

and had been trying to screw himself up a bit. Anyway, he looked rather wild, and I tried to persuade him to stay a little while before going out of the club — it was in the hall, you know. I behaved like an ass myself — you know I'm awfully obstinate. He really did look a little wild, though! I held his arm — just like that, you know —" he laid his broad hand upon Katharine's glove — "and then, somehow, we got fooling together — there in the hall — and he tripped me up on my back, and ran out. It was all over in a minute; and I was rather angry at the time, because Crowdie and little Frank Miner were there, and a couple of servants. But I give you my word, I didn't say anything beyond making them all four swear that they wouldn't tell —"

"And this is the result!" said Katharine, with a sigh. "What was that he said about being turned out of the club?"

"Crowdie? Oh — some nonsense or other! He felt his ladyship offended because there had been a bit of a wrestling match in the hall of his club, that's all, and said he meant to leave it —"

"No — but about Jack being turned out —"

"It's all nonsense of Crowdie's. Men are turned out of a club for cheating at cards, and that sort of thing. Besides, Jack's popular with most of the men. I don't believe you could get a committee to sit on his offences — not if he locked the

oldest member up in the ice-chest, and threw the billiard-table out of the window. He says he has no friends — but it's all bosh, you know — everybody likes him, except that doughy brother-in-law of mine!"

Katharine was momentarily comforted by Bright's account of the matter, delivered in his familiar, uncompromising fashion. But she was very far from regaining her composure. She saw that Bright was purposely making light of the matter; and in the course of the silence, which lasted several minutes after he had finished speaking, it all looked worse than it had looked before she had known the exact truth.

She felt, too, an instinct of repulsion from Ralston, which she had never known, nor dreamed possible. Could he not have controlled himself a few hours longer? It was their wedding day. Twelve hours had not passed from the time when they had left the church together until he had been drunk — positively drunk, to the point of knocking down his best friend in such a place as a club. She could not deny the facts. Even Hamilton Bright, kind — more than kind, devoted — did not attempt to conceal the fact that Ralston had been what he called 'lively.' And if Bright could not try to make him out to have been sober, who could?

And they had been married that morning! If he had been sober — the word cut her like a whip

— if he had been sober, they would at that very moment have been sitting together — planning their future — perhaps in that very corner.

She did not know all yet, either. The clock was striking twelve. It was about at that time that John Ralston was brought into his mother's house by a couple of policemen, who had found his card-case in his pocket, and had the sense — with the hope of a handsome fee — to bring him home, insensible, stunned almost to death with the blow he had received.

They had waked him roughly, the conductor and the other man, who was really a prize fighter, at the end of the run, in front of the horse-car stables, and John had struck out before he was awake, as some excitable men do. The fight had followed as a matter of course, out in the snow. The professional had not meant to hurt him, but had lost his temper when John had reached him and cut his lip, and a right-handed counter had settled the matter — a heavy right-hander just under John's left ear.

The policemen said they had picked him up out of a drunken brawl. According to them, everybody was drunk — Ralston, the prize fighter, — who had paid five dollars to be left in peace after the adventure, — the conductor, the driver and every living thing on the scene of action, including the wretched horses of the car.

There was a short account of the affair in the morning papers, but only one or two of them mentioned Ralston's name.

Katharine had yet much to learn about the doings on her wedding day, when she suddenly announced her intention of going home before the ball was half over. Hester Crowdie took her, in her own carriage; and Mrs. Lauderdale and Crowdie stayed till the end.

Now against all this chain of evidence, including that of several men who had met John in Fifth Avenue about six o'clock, with no overcoat and his hat badly smashed, against evidence that would have hanged a man ten times over in a murder case, stood the plain fact, which nobody but Ralston knew, and which no one would ever believe — the plain fact that he had drunk nothing at all.

CHAPTER XXI.

In the grey dawn of Friday morning Katharine woke from broken sleep to face the reality of what she had done twenty-four hours earlier. It had snowed very heavily during the night, and her first conscious perception was of that strange, cold glare which the snow reflects, and which makes even a bedroom feel like a chilly outer hall into which the daylight penetrates through thick panes of ground glass.

She had slept very little, and against her will, losing consciousness from time to time out of sheer exhaustion, and roused again by the cruel reuniting of the train of thought. Those who have received a wound by which a principal nerve has been divided, know how intense is the suffering when the severed cords begin to grow together, with agonizing slowness, day by day and week by week, convulsing the whole frame of the man in their meeting. Katharine felt something like that each time that the merciful curtains of sleep were suddenly torn asunder between herself and the truth of the present.

The pain was combined of many elements, too,

and each hurt her in its own way. There was the shame of the thing, first, the burning, scarlet shame — the thought of it had a colour for her. John Ralston was disgraced in the eyes of all the world. Even the smooth-faced dandy, fresh from college, young Van De Water, might sneer at him and welcome, and feel superior to him, for never having gone so far in folly. Now if such men as Van De Water knew the story, it was but a question of hours, and all society must know it, too. Society would set down John Ralston as a hopeless case. Katharine wondered, with a sickening chill, whether the virtuous — like her father — would turn their backs on Ralston and refuse to know him. She did not know. But Ralston was her husband.

The thought almost drove her mad. There was that condition of the inevitable in her position which gives fate its hold over men's minds. She could not escape. She could not go back to the point where she had been yesterday morning, and begin her life again. As she had begun it, so it must go on to the very end, 'until death them should part' — the life of a spotless girl married to a man who was the very incarnation of a disgusting vice. In those first moments it would have been a human satisfaction to have been free to blame some one besides herself for what she had done.

But even now, when every bitter thought seemed to rise up against John Ralston, she could not say that the fault had been his if she had bound herself to him. To the very last he had resisted. This was Friday morning, and on the Wednesday night at the Thirlwalls' he had told her that he could not be sure of himself. By and by, perhaps, that brave act of his might begin to tell in his favour with her, but not yet. The faces, the expressions, the words, of those from whom she had learned the story of his doings were before her eyes and present in her hearing now, as she lay wide awake in the early morning, staring with hot eyes at the cold grey ceiling of her room.

It was only yesterday that her sister Charlotte had sat there, lamenting her imaginary woes. How Katharine had despised her! Had she not deliberately chosen, of her own free will, and was she not bound to stand by her choice, out of mere self-respect? And Katharine had felt then that, come what might, for good or ill, better or worse, honour or dishonour, she was glad that she had married John Ralston and that she would face all imaginable deaths to help him, even a little. But now — now, it was different. He had failed her at the very outset. It was not that others had turned upon him, despising him wholly for a partial fault. The public disgrace made it all worse than it might have been, but it was only secondary,

after all. The keenest pain was from the thrust that had entered Katharine's own heart. It had been with him as though she had not existed. He had not been strong enough, for her sake, on their wedding day — the day of days to her — to keep himself sober from three o'clock in the afternoon until ten o'clock at night. Only seven hours, Katharine repeated to herself in the cold snow-glare of the early morning — seven little hours; her lips were hot and dry with anger, and her hands were cold, as she thought of it. It was not only the weakness of him, contemptible as that was — if it had at least been weakness for something less brutal, less beastly, less degrading. Katharine chose the strongest words she could think of, and smote him with them in her heart. Was he not her husband, and had she not the right to hate and despise what he had done? It was bad enough, as she said it, and as it appeared to most people that morning. There was not a link missing in the evidence, from the moment when John had begun to lose his temper with Miner at the club, until he had been brought home insensible to his mother's house by a couple of policemen. His relations and his best friends were all convinced that he had been very drunk, and there was no reason why society in general should be more merciful than his own people. Robert Lauderdale said nothing, but when he saw the paragraph in

a morning paper describing 'Mr. John R——'s drunken encounter with a professional pugilist,' he regarded the statement as an elucidatory comment on his interview with his great-nephew. No one spoke of the matter in Robert Lauderdale's presence, but the old gentleman felt that it was a distinct shame to the whole family, and he inwardly expressed himself strongly. The only one who tried to make matters look a little better than every one believed they were, was Hamilton Bright. He could not deny the facts, but he put on a cheerful countenance and made the best of them, laughing good-humouredly at John's misfortune, and asking every one who ventured an unfavourable comment whether John was the only man alive on that day in the city of New York who had once been a little lively, recommending the beardless critics of his friend's conduct to go out and drive cattle in the Nacimiento Valley if they wished to understand the real properties of alcohol, and making the older ones feel uncomfortable by reminding them vividly of the errors of their youth. But no one else said anything in Ralston's favour. He was down just then, and it was as well to hit him when everybody was doing the same thing.

Katharine tried to make up her mind as to what she should do, and she did not find it an easy matter. It would be useless to deny the fact that what she felt for Ralston on that morning

bore little resemblance to love. She remembered vaguely, and with wonder, how she had promised to stand by him and help him to her utmost to overcome his weakness. How was she to help him now? How could she play a part and conceal the anger, the pain, the shame that boiled and burned in her? If he should come to her, what should she say? She had promised that she would never refer to the matter in any way, when it had seemed but the shadow of a possibility. But it had turned into the reality so soon, and into such a reality — far more repulsive than anything of which she had dreamed. Besides, she added in her heart, it was unpardonable on that day of all days. Married she was, but forgive she could not and would not. Wounded love is less merciful than any hatred, and Katharine could not help deepening the wound by recalling every circumstance of the previous evening, from the moment when she had looked in vain for John's face in the crowded room, until she had broken down and asked Hester Crowdie to bring her home.

She rose at last to face the day, undecided, worn out with fatigue, and scared, had she been willing to admit the fact, by the possibilities of the next twelve hours. Half dressed, she paused and sat down to think it all over again — all she knew, for she had yet to learn the end of the story.

She had been married just four and twenty

hours. Yesterday, at that very time, life had been before her, joyous, hopeful, merry. All that was to be had glistened with gold and gleamed with silver, with the silver of dreamland and the gold of hope, having love set as a jewel in the midst. To-day the precious things were but dross and tinsel and cheap glass. For it was all over, and there was no returning. Real life was beginning, began, had begun — the reality of an existence not defined except in the extent of its suffering, but desperately limited in the possibilities of its happiness.

Katharine tried to think it over in some other way. The snow-glare was more grey than ever, and her eyes ached with it, whichever way she turned. The room was cold, and her teeth chattered as she sat there, half dressed. Then, when she let in the hot air from the furnace, it was dry and unbearable. And she tried hard to find some other way in which to save her breaking heart — if so be that she might look at it so as not to see the break, and so, perhaps — if there were mercy in heaven, beyond that aching snow-glare — that by not seeing she might feel a little less, only a little less. It was hard that she should have to feel so much and so very bitterly, and all at once. But there was no other way. Instead of facing life with John Ralston, she had now to face life and John Ralston. How could she guess what he

might do next? A drunken man has little control of his faculties — John might suddenly publish in the club the fact that he was her husband.

He was not the same John Ralston whom she had married yesterday morning, and whom she had seen yesterday afternoon for one moment at her door. The hours had changed him. Instead of his face there was a horrible mask; instead of his straight, elastic figure there was the reeling, delapidated body of the drunken wretch her father had once shown her in the streets. How could she love that thing? It was not even a man. She loathed it and hated it, for it had broken her life. She remembered having once broken a thermometer when she had been a little girl. She remembered the jagged edge of glass, and how the bright mercury had all run out and lost itself in tiny drops in the carpet. She recalled it vividly, and she felt that she was like the broken thermometer, and the idea was not ridiculous to her, as it must be to any one else, because she was badly hurt.

Vague ideas of a long and painful sacrifice rose before her — of something which must inevitably be begun and ended, like an execution. She had never understood what the inevitable meant until to-day.

Then, all at once, the great question presented itself clearly, the great query, the enormous interrogation of which we are all aware, more or less

dimly, more or less clearly — the question which is like the death-rattle in the throat of the dying nineteenth century, — 'What is it all for?'

It came in a rush of passionate disappointment and anger and pain. It had come to Katharine before then, and she had faced it with the easy answer, that it was for love — that it was all for love of John Ralston — life, its thoughts, its deeds, its hopes, its many fears — all for him, so far as Katharine Lauderdale was concerned. Love made God true, and heaven a fact, the angels her guardians now and her companions hereafter. And her love had been so great that it had seemed to demand a wider wealth of heavenly things wherewith to frame it. God was hardly good enough nor heaven broad enough.

But if this were to be the end, what had it all meant? She stood before the window and looked at the grey sky till the reflection from the dead white snow beneath her window and on the opposite roof was painful. Yet the little physical pain was a relief. She turned, quite suddenly, and fell upon her knees beside the corner of the toilet table, and buried her face in her hands and became conscious of prayer.

That seems to be the only way of describing what she felt. The wave of pain beat upon her agonized heart, and though the wave could not speak words, yet the surging and the moaning,

and the forward rushing, and the backward, whispering ebb, were as the sounds of many prayers.

Was God good? How could she tell? Was He kind? She did not know. Merciful? What would be mercy to her? God was there — somewhere beyond the snow-glare that hurt so, and the girl's breaking heart cried to Him, quite incoherently, and expecting nothing, but consciously, though it knew more of its own bitterness than of God's goodness, just then.

Momentarily the great question sank back into the outer darkness with which it was concerned, and little by little the religious idea of a sacrifice to be made was restored with greater stability than before. She had chosen her own burden, her own way of suffering, and she must bear all as well as she could. The waves of pain beat and crashed against her heart — she wondered, childishly, whether it were broken yet. She knew it was breaking, because it hurt her so.

There was no connected thread of thought in the torn tissue of her mind, any more than there was any coherence in the few words which from time to time tried to form themselves on her lips without her knowledge. So long as she had been lying still and staring at the grey ceiling, the storm had been brooding. It had burst now, and she was as helpless in it as though it had been a real storm on a real sea, and she alone on a driving wreck.

She lifted her face and wrung her hands together. It was as though some one from behind had taken a turn of rough rope round her breast — some one who was very strong — and as though the rope were tightening fast. Soon she should not be able to draw breath against it. As she felt it crushing her, she knew that the hideous picture her mind had made of John was coming before her eyes again. In a moment it must be there. This time she felt as though she must scream when she saw it. But when it came she made no sound. She only dropped her head again, and her forehead beat upon the back of her hands and her fingers scratched and drew the cover of the toilet table. Then the picture was drowned in the tide of pain — as though it had fallen flat upon the dark sands between her and the cruel surf of her immense suffering that roared up to crash against her heart again. It must break this time, she thought. It could not last forever — nor even all day long. God was there — somewhere.

A lull came, and she said something aloud. It seemed to her that she had forgotten words and had to make new ones — although those she spoke were old and good. With the sound of her own voice came a little courage, and enough determination to make her rise from her knees and face daylight again.

Mechanically, as she continued to dress, she

looked at herself in the mirror. Her features did not seem to be her own. She remembered to have seen a plaster cast from a death mask, in a museum, and her face made her think of that. There were no lines in it, but there were shadows where the lines would be some day. The grey eyes had no light in them, and scarcely seemed alive. Her colour was that of wax, and there was something unnatural in the strong black brows and lashes.

The door opened at that moment, and Mrs. Lauderdale entered the room. She seemed none the worse for having danced till morning, and the freshness which had come back to her had not disappeared again. She stood still for a moment, looking at Katharine's face as the latter turned towards her with an enquiring glance, in which there was something of fear and something of shyness. A nervous thoroughbred has the same look, if some one unexpectedly enters its box. Mrs. Lauderdale had a newspaper in her hand.

"How you look, child!" she exclaimed, as she came forward. "Haven't you slept? Or what is the matter?"

She kissed Katharine affectionately, without waiting for an answer.

"Well, I don't wonder," she added, a moment later, as though speaking to herself. "I've been reading this —"

She paused and hesitated, as though not sure

whether she should give Katharine the paper or not, and she glanced once more at the paragraph before deciding.

"What is it about?" Katharine asked, in a tired voice. "Read it."

"Yes — but I ought to tell you first. You know, last night — you asked me about Jack Ralston, and I wouldn't tell you what I had heard. Then I saw that somebody else had told you — you really ought to be more careful, dear! Everybody was noticing it."

"What?"

"Why — your face! It's of no use to advertise the fact that you are interested in Jack's doings. They don't seem to have been very creditable — it's just as well that he didn't try to come to the ball in his condition. Do you know what he was doing, late last night, just about supper-time? I'm so glad I spoke to you both the other day. Imagine the mere idea of marrying a man who gets into drunken brawls with prize fighters and is taken home by the police — "

"Stop — please! Don't talk like that!" Katharine was trembling visibly.

"My dear child! It's far better that I should tell you — it's in the papers this morning. That sort of thing can't be concealed, you know. The first person you meet will talk to you about it."

Katharine had turned from her and was facing

the mirror, steadying herself with her hands upon the dressing table.

"And as for behaving as you did last night — he's not worth it. One might forgive him for being idle and all that — but men who get tipsy in the streets and fight horse-car conductors and pugilists are not exactly the kind of people one wants to meet in society — to dance with, for instance. Just listen to this —"

"Mother!"

"No — I want you to hear it. You can judge for yourself. 'Mr. John R——, a well-known young gentleman about town and a near relation of —'"

"Mother — please don't!" cried Katharine, bending over the table as though she could not hold up her head.

"'— one of our financial magnates,'" continued Mrs. Lauderdale, inexorably, "'and the hero of more than one midnight adventure, has at last met his match in the person of Tam Shelton, the famous light-weight pugilist. An entirely unadvertised and scantily attended encounter took place between these two gentlemen last night between eleven and twelve o'clock, in consequence of a dispute which had arisen in a horse-car. It appears that the representative of the four hundred had mistaken the public conveyance for his own comfortable quarters, and suddenly feeling very tired had naturally proceeded to go to bed —'"

With a very quick motion Katharine turned, took the paper from her mother's hands and tore the doubled fourfold sheet through twice, almost without any apparent effort, before Mrs. Lauderdale could interfere. She said nothing as she tossed the torn bits under the table, but her eyes had suddenly got life in them again.

"Katharine!" exclaimed Mrs. Lauderdale, in great annoyance. "How can you be so rude?"

"And how can you be so unkind, mother?" asked Katharine, facing her. "Don't you know what I'm suffering?"

"It's better to know everything, and have it over," answered Mrs. Lauderdale, with astonishing indifference. "It only seemed to me that as every one would be discussing this abominable affair, you should know beforehand just what the facts were. I don't in the least wish to hurt your feelings — but now that it's all over with Jack, you may as well know."

"What may I as well know? That you hate him? That you have suddenly changed your mind —"

"My dear, I'll merely ask you whether a man who does such things is respectable. Yes, or no?"

"That's not the question," answered Katharine, with rising anger. "Something strange has happened to you. Until last Tuesday you never said anything against him. Then you changed, all in a

moment — just as you would take off one pair of gloves and put on another. You used to understand me — and now — oh, mother!"

Her voice shook, and she turned away again. The little momentary flame of her anger was swept out of existence by the returning tide of pain.

Mrs. Lauderdale's whole character seemed to have changed, as her daughter said that it had, between one day and the next. A strong new passion had risen up in the very midst of it and had torn it to shreds, as it were. Even now, as she gazed at Katharine, she was conscious that she envied the girl for being able to suffer without looking old. She hated herself for it, but she could not resist it, any more than she could help glancing at her own reflection in the mirror that morning to see whether her face showed any fatigue after the long ball. This at least was satisfactory, for she was as brilliantly fresh as ever. She could hardly understand how she could have seemed so utterly broken down and weary on Monday night and all day on Tuesday, but she could never forget how she had then looked, and the fear of it was continually upon her. Nevertheless she loved Katharine still. The conflict between her love and her envy made her seem oddly inconsequent and almost frivolous. Katharine fancied that her mother was growing to be like Charlotte. The appealing tone of the girl's

last words rang in Mrs. Lauderdale's ears and accused her. She stretched out her hand and tried to draw Katharine towards her, affectionately, as she often did when she was seated and the girl was standing.

"Katharine, dear child," she began, "I'm not changed to you — it's only — "

"Yes — it's only Jack!" answered Katharine, bitterly.

"We won't talk of him, darling," said Mrs. Lauderdale, softly, and trying to soothe her. "You see, I didn't know how badly you felt about it — ".

"You might have guessed. You know that I love him — you never knew how much!"

"Yes, sweetheart, but now — "

"There is no 'but' — it's the passion of my life — the first, the last, and the only one!"

"You're so young, my darling, that it seems to you as though there could never be anything else — "

"Seems! I know."

Though Mrs. Lauderdale had already repented of what she had done and really wished to be sympathetic, she could not help smiling faintly at the absolute conviction with which Katharine spoke. There was something so young and whole-hearted in the tone as well as in those words that only found an echo far back in the forgotten fields of the older

woman's understanding. She hardly knew what to answer, and patted Katharine's head gently while she sought for something to say. But Katharine resented the affectionate manner, being in no humour to appreciate anything which had a savour of artificiality about it. She withdrew her hand and faced her mother again.

"I know all that you can tell me," she said. "I know all there is to be known, without reading that vile thing. But I don't know what I shall do — I shall decide. And, please — mother — if you care for me at all — don't talk about it. It's hard enough, as it is — just the thing, without any words."

She spoke with an effort, almost forcing the syllables from her lips, for she was suffering terribly just then. She wished that her mother would go away, and leave her to herself, if only for half an hour. She had so much more to think of than any one could know, or guess — except old Robert Lauderdale and Jack himself.

"Well, child — as you like," said Mrs. Lauderdale, feeling that she had made a series of mistakes. "I'm sure I don't care to talk about it in the least, but I can't prevent your father from saying what he pleases. Of course he began to make remarks about your not coming to breakfast this morning. I didn't go down myself until he had nearly finished, and he seemed hurt at our neglect-

ing him. And then, he had been reading the paper, and so the question came up. But, dearest, don't think I'm unkind and heartless and all that sort of thing. I love you dearly, child. Don't you believe me?"

She put her arm round Katharine's neck and kissed her.

"Oh, yes!" Katharine answered wearily. "I'm sure you do."

Mrs. Lauderdale looked into her face long and earnestly.

"It's quite wonderful!" she exclaimed at last. "You're a little pale — but, after all, you're just as pretty as ever this morning."

"Am I?" asked Katharine, indifferently. "I don't feel pretty."

"Oh, well — that will all go away," answered Mrs. Lauderdale, withdrawing her arm and turning towards the door. "Yes," she repeated thoughtfully, as though to herself, "that will all go away. You're so young — still — so young!"

Her head sank forward a little as she went out and she did not look back at her daughter.

Katharine drew a long breath of relief when she found herself alone. The interview had not lasted many minutes, but it had seemed endless. She looked at the torn pieces of the newspaper which lay on the floor, and she shuddered a little and turned from them uneasily, half afraid that some

supernatural power might force her to stoop down and pick them up, and fit them together and read the paragraph to the end. She sat down to try and collect her thoughts.

But she grew more and more confused as she reviewed the past and tried to call up the future. For instance, if John Ralston came to the house that afternoon, to explain, to defend himself, to ask forgiveness of her, what should she say to him? Could she send him away without a word of hope? And if not, what hope should she give him? And hope of what? He was her husband. He had a right to claim her if he pleased — before every one.

The words all seemed to be gradually losing their meaning for her. The bells of the horse-cars as they passed through Clinton Place sang queer little songs to her, and the snow-glare made her eyes ache. There was no longer any apparent reason why the day should go on, nor why it should end. She did not know what time it was, and she did not care to look. What difference did it make?

Her ball gown was lying on the sofa, as she had laid it when she had come home. She looked at it and wondered vaguely whether she should ever again take the trouble to put on such a thing, and to go and show herself amongst a crowd of people who were perfectly indifferent to her.

On reflection, for she seriously tried to reflect, it seemed more probable that John would write before

coming, and this would give her an opportunity of answering. It would be easier to write than to speak. But if she wrote, what should she say? It was just as hard to decide, and the words would look more unkind on paper, perhaps, than she could possibly make them sound.

Was it her duty to speak harshly? She asked herself the question quite suddenly, and it startled her. If her heart were really broken, she thought, there could be nothing for her to do but to say once what she thought and then begin the weary life that lay before her — an endless stretch of glaring snow, and endless jingling of horse-car bells.

She rose suddenly and roused herself, conscious that she was almost losing her senses. The monstrous incongruity of the thoughts that crossed her brain frightened her. She pressed her hand to her forehead and with characteristic strength determined there and then to occupy herself in some way or other during the day. To sit there in her room much longer would either drive her mad or make her break down completely. She feared the mere thought of those tears in which some women find relief, almost as much as the idea of becoming insane, which presented itself vividly as a possibility just then. Whatever was to happen during the day, she must at any cost have control over her outward actions. She stood for one moment with her hands clasped to her brows, and then turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

On the present occasion John Ralston deserved very much more sympathy than he got from the world at large, which would have found it very hard to believe the truth about his doings on the afternoon and night of Thursday. He was still unconscious when he was carried into the house by the two policemen and deposited upon his own bed. When he opened his eyes, they met his mother's, staring down upon him with an expression in which grief, fear and disgust were all struggling for the mastery. She was standing by his bedside, bending over him, and rubbing something on his temples from time to time. He was but just conscious that he was at home at last, and that she was with him, and he smiled faintly at her and closed his eyes again.

He had hardly done so, however, when he realized what a look was in her face. He was not really injured in any way, he was perfectly sober, and he was very hungry. As soon as the effect of the last blow began to wear off, his brain worked clearly enough. He understood at once that his mother must suppose him to be intoxicated. It

was no wonder if she did, as he knew. He was in a far worse plight now than he had been on Monday afternoon, as far as appearances were concerned. His clothes were drenched with the wet snow, his hat had altogether disappeared in the fight, his head was bruised, and his face was ghastly pale. He kept his eyes shut for a while and tried to recall what had happened last. But it was not at all clear to him why he had been fighting with the man who wore the fur collar and the chain, nor why he had wandered to Tompkins Square. Those were the two facts which recalled themselves most vividly at first, in a quite disconnected fashion. Next came the vision of Robert Lauderdale and the recollection of the violent gesture with which the latter had accidentally knocked John's hat out of his hand; and after that he recalled the scene at the club. It seemed to him that he had been through a series of violent struggles which had no connection with each other. His head ached terribly and he should have liked to be left in the dark to try and go to sleep. Then, as he lay there, he knew that his mother was still looking at him with that expression in which disgust seemed to him to be uppermost. It flashed across his mind instantly that she must naturally think he had been drinking. But though his memory of what had happened was very imperfect, and though he was dizzy and faint, he knew very well

that he was sober, and he realized that he must impress the fact upon his mother at any cost, immediately, both for his own sake and for hers. He opened his eyes once more and looked at her, wondering how his voice would sound when he should speak.

"Mother dear —" he began. Then he paused, watching her face.

But her expression did not unbend. It was quite clear now that she believed the very worst of him, and he wondered whether the mere fact of his speaking connectedly would persuade her that he was telling the truth.

"Don't try to talk," she said in a low, hard voice. "I don't want to know anything about your doings."

"Mother — I'm perfectly sober," said John Ralston, quietly. "I want you to listen to me, please, and persuade yourself."

Mrs. Ralston drew herself up to her full height as she stood beside him. Her even lips curled scornfully, and the lines of temper deepened into soft, straight furrows in her keen face.

"You may be half sober now," she answered with profound contempt. "You're so strong — it's impossible to tell."

"So you don't believe me," said John, who was prepared for her incredulity. "But you must — somehow. My head aches badly, and I can't talk

very well, but I must make you believe me. It's — it's very important that you should, mother."

This time she said nothing. She left the bedside and moved about the room, stopping before the dressing table and mechanically putting the brushes and other small objects quite straight. If she had felt that it were safe to leave him alone she would have left him at once and would have locked herself into her own room. For she was very angry, and she believed that her anger was justified. So long as he had been unconscious, she had felt a certain fear for his safety which made a link with the love she bore him. But, as usual, his iron constitution seemed to have triumphed. She remembered clearly how, on Monday afternoon, he had evidently been the worse for drink when he had entered her room, and yet how, in less than an hour, he had reappeared apparently quite sober. He was very strong, and there was no knowing what he could do. She had forgiven him that once, but it was not in her nature to forgive easily, and she told herself that this time it would be impossible. He had disgraced himself and her.

She continued to turn away from him. He watched her, and saw how desperate the situation was growing. He knew well enough that there would be some talk about him on the morrow and that it would come to Katharine's ears, in explana-

tion of his absence from the Assembly ball. His mind worked rapidly and energetically now, for it was quite clear to him that he had no time to lose. If he should fall asleep without having persuaded his mother that he was quite himself, he could never, in all his life, succeed in destroying the fatal impression she must carry with her. While she was turning from him he made a great effort, and putting his feet to the ground, sat upon the edge of his bed. His head swam for a moment, but he steadied himself with both hands and faced the light, thinking that the brilliant glare might help him.

"You must believe me, now," he said, "or you never will. I've had rather a bad day of it, and another accident, and a fight with a better man than myself, so that I'm rather battered. But I haven't been drinking."

"Look at yourself!" answered Mrs. Ralston, scornfully. "Look at yourself in the glass and see whether you have any chance of convincing me of that. Since you're not killed, and not injured, I shall leave you to yourself. I hope you won't talk about it to-morrow. This is the second time within four days. It's just a little more than I can bear. If you can't live like a gentleman, you had better go away and live in the way you prefer — somewhere else."

As she spoke, her anger began to take hold of

her, and her voice fell to a lower pitch, growing concentrated and cruel.

"You're unjust, though you don't mean to be," said John. "But, as I said, it's very important that you should recognize the truth. All sorts of things have happened to me, and many people will say that I had been drinking. And now that it's over I want you to establish the fact that I have not. It's quite natural that you should think as you do, of course. But —"

"I'm glad you admit that, at least," interrupted Mrs. Ralston. "Nothing you can possibly say or do can convince me that you've been sober. You may be now — you're such a curiously organized man. But you've not been all day."

"Mother, I swear to you that I have!"

"Stop, John!" cried Mrs. Ralston, crossing the room suddenly and standing before him. "I won't let you — you shan't! We've not all been good in the family, but we've told the truth. If you were sober you wouldn't —"

John Ralston was accustomed to be believed when he made a statement, even if he did not swear to it. His virtues were not many, and were not very serviceable, on the whole; but he was a truthful man, and his anger rose, even against his own mother, when he saw that she refused to believe him. He forgot his bruises and his mortal weariness, and sprang to his feet before her. Their eyes met steadily, as he spoke.

"I give you my sacred word of honour, mother."

He saw a startled look come into his mother's eyes, and they seemed to waver for a moment and then grow steady again. Then, without warning, she turned from him once more, and went and seated herself in a small arm-chair by the fire. She sat with her elbow resting on her knee, while her hand supported her chin, and she stared at the smouldering embers as though in deep thought.

Her principal belief was in the code of honour, and in the absolute sanctity of everything connected with it, and she had brought up her son in that belief, and in the practice of what it meant. He did not give his word lightly. She did not at that moment recall any occasion upon which he had given it in her hearing, and she knew what value he set upon it.

The evidence of her senses, on the other hand, was strong, and that of her reason was stronger still. It did not seem conceivable that he could be telling the truth. It was not possible that as his sober, natural self he should have got into the condition in which he had been brought home to her. But it was quite within the bounds of possibility, she thought, that he should have succeeded in steadying himself so far as to be able to speak connectedly. In that case he had lied to her, when he had given his word of honour, a moment ago.

She tried to look at it fairly, for it was a question quite as grave in her estimation as one of life or death. She would far rather have known him dead than dishonourable, and his honour was arraigned at her tribunal in that moment. Her impulse was to believe him, to go back to him, and kiss him, and ask his forgiveness for having accused him wrongly. But the evidence stood between him and her as a wall of ice. The physical impression of horror and disgust was too strong. The outward tokens were too clear. Even the honesty of his whole life from his childhood could not face and overcome them.

And so he must have lied to her. It was a conviction, and she could not help it. And then she, too, felt that iron hands were tightening a band round her breast, and that she could not bear much more. There was but one small, pitiful excuse for him. In spite of his quiet tones, he might be so far gone as not to know what he was saying when he spoke. It was a forlorn hope, a mere straw, a poor little chance of life for her mother's love. She knew that life could never be the same again, if she could not believe her son.

The struggle went on in silence. She did not move from her seat nor change her position. Her eyelids scarcely quivered as she gazed steadily at the coals of the dying wood fire. Behind her,

"She knew that life could never be the same again, if she could not believe her son."—Vol. II., p. 142.

John Ralston slowly paced the room, following the pattern of the carpet, and glancing at her from time to time, unconscious of pain or fatigue, for he knew as well as she herself that his soul was in the balance of her soul's justice. But the silence was becoming intolerable to him. As for her, she could not have told whether minutes or hours had passed since he had spoken. The trial was going against him, and she almost wished that she might never hear his voice again.

The questions and the arguments and the evidence chased each other through her brain faster and faster, and ever in the same vicious circle, till she was almost distracted, though she sat there quite motionless and outwardly calm. At last she dropped both hands upon her knees; her head fell forward upon her breast, and a short, quick sound, neither a sigh nor a groan, escaped her lips. It was finished. The last argument had failed; the last hope was gone. Her son had disgraced himself — that was little; he had lied on his word of honour — that was greater and worse than death.

"Mother, you've always believed me," said John, standing still behind her and looking down at her bent head.

"Until now," she answered, in a low, heart-broken voice.

John turned away sharply, and began to pace the floor again with quickening steps. He knew

as well as she what it must mean if he did not convince her then and there. In a few hours it would be too late. All sorts of mad and foolish ideas crossed his mind, but he rejected them one after the other. They were all ridiculous before the magnitude of her conviction. He had never seen her as she was now, not even when his father had died. He grew more and more desperate as the minutes passed. If his voice, his manner, his calm asseveration of the truth could not convince her, he asked himself if anything could. And if not, what could convince Katharine to-morrow? His recollections were all coming back vividly to him now. He remembered everything that had happened since the early morning. Strange to say, — and it is a well-known peculiarity of such cases, — he recalled distinctly the circumstances of his fall in the dark, and the absence of all knowledge of the direction he was taking afterwards. He knew, now, how he had wandered for hours in the great city, and he remembered many things he had seen, all of which were perfectly familiar, and each of which, at any other time, would have told him well enough whither he was going. He reconstructed every detail without effort. He even knew that when he had fallen over the heap of building material he had hurt one of his fingers, a fact which he had not noticed at the time. He looked at his hand now to convince himself. The

finger was badly scratched, and the nail was torn to the quick.

"Will nothing make you change your mind?" he asked, stopping in the middle of the room. "Will nothing I can do convince you?"

"It would be hard," answered Mrs. Ralston, shaking her head.

"I've done all I can, then," said John. "There's nothing more to be said. You believe that I can lie to you and give you my word for a lie. Is that it?"

"Don't say it, please — it's bad enough without any more words." She rested her chin upon her hand once more and stared at the fire.

"There is one thing more," answered John, suddenly. "I think I can make you believe me still."

A bitter smile twisted Mrs. Ralston's even lips, but she did not move nor speak.

"Will you believe the statement of a good doctor on his oath?" asked John, quietly.

Mrs. Ralston looked up at him suddenly. There was a strange expression in her eyes, something like hope, but with a little distrust.

"Yes," she said, after a moment's thought. "I would believe that."

"Most people would," answered John, with sudden coldness. "Will you send for a doctor? Or shall I go myself?"

"Are you in earnest?" asked Mrs. Ralston, rising slowly from her seat and looking at him.

"I'm in earnest — yes. You seem to be. It's rather a serious matter to doubt my word of honour — even for my mother."

Being quite sure of himself, he spoke very bitterly and coldly. The time for appealing to her kindness, her love, or her belief in him was over, and the sense of approaching triumph was thrilling, after the humiliation he had suffered in silence. Mrs. Ralston, strange to say, hesitated.

"It's very late to send for any one now," she said.

"Very well; I'll go myself," answered John. "The man should come, if it were within five minutes of the Last Judgment. Will you go to your room for a moment, mother, while I dress? I can't go as I am."

"No. I'll send some one." She stood still, watching his face. "I'll ring for a messenger," she said, and left the room.

By this time her conviction was so deep seated that she had many reasons for not letting him leave the house, nor even change his clothes. He was very strong. It was evident, too, that he had completely regained possession of his faculties, and she believed that he was capable, at short notice, of so restoring his appearance as to deceive the keenest doctor. She remembered what had happened on Monday, and resolved that the physician should see him just as he was. It did not

strike her, in her experience, that a doctor does not judge such matters as a woman does.

During her brief absence from the room, John was thinking of very different matters. It did not even strike him that he might smooth his hair or wash his soiled and blood-stained hands, and he continued to pace the room under strong excitement.

"Doctor Routh will come, I think," said Mrs. Ralston, as she came in.

She sat down where she had been sitting before, in the small easy chair before the fire. She leaned back and folded her hands, in the attitude of a person resigned to await events. John merely nodded as she spoke, and did not stop walking up and down. He was thinking of the future now, for he knew that he had made sure of the present. He was weighing the chances of discretion on the part of the two men who had been witnesses of his struggle with Bright in the hall of the club. As for Bright himself, though he was the injured party, John knew that he could be trusted to be silent. He might never forgive John, but he could not gossip about what had happened. Frank Miner would probably follow Bright's lead. The dangerous man was Crowdie, who would tell what he had seen, most probably to Katharine herself, and that very night. He might account for his absence from the dinner-party to which he had been en-

gaged, and from the ball, on the ground of an accident. People might say what they pleased about that, but it would be hard to make any one believe that he had been sober when he had so suddenly lost his temper and tripped up the pacific Hamilton Bright in the afternoon.

He knew, of course, that his mother's testimony would have counted for nothing, even if she had believed him, and bitterly as he resented her unbelief, he recognized that it was bringing about a good result. No one could doubt the evidence of such a man as Doctor Routh, and the latter would of course be ready at any time to repeat his statement, if it were necessary to clear John's reputation.

But when he thought of Katharine, his instinct told him that matters could not be so easily settled. It was quite true that he was in no way to blame for having fallen over a heap of stones in a dark street, but he knew how anxiously she must have waited for him at the ball, and what she must have felt if, as he suspected, Crowdie had given her his own version of what had taken place in the afternoon. It was not yet so late but that he might have found her still at the Assembly rooms, and so far as his strength was concerned, he would have gone there even at that hour. Tough as he was, a few hours, more or less, of fatigue and effort would make little difference to him, though he had scarcely touched food that day. He was one of

those men who are not dependent for their strength on the last meal they happen to have eaten, as the majority are, and who break down under a fast of twenty-four hours. In spite of all he had been through, moreover, his determined abstinence during the last days was beginning to tell favourably on him, for he was young, and his nerves had a boundless recuperative elasticity. Hungry and tired and bruised as he was, and accustomed as he had always been to swallow a stimulant when the machinery was slackened, he did not now feel that craving at all as he had felt it on the previous night, when he had stood in the corner at the Thirlwalls' dance. That seemed to have been a turning-point with him. He had thought so at the time, and he was sure of it now. He felt that just as he was he could dress himself, and go to the Assembly if he pleased, and that he should not break down.

But his appearance was against him, as he was obliged to admit when he looked at himself in the mirror. His face was swollen and bruised, his eyes were sunken and haggard, and his skin was almost livid in its sallow whiteness. Others would judge him as his mother had judged, and Katharine might be the first to do so. On the whole, it seemed wisest to write to her early in the morning, and to explain exactly what had happened. In the course of the day he could go and see her.

He had reached this conclusion, when the sound of wheels, grating out of the snow against the curb-stone of the pavement, interrupted his meditations, and he stopped in his walk. At the same moment Mrs. Ralston rose from her seat.

"I'll let him in," she said briefly, as John advanced towards the door.

"Let me go," he said. "Why not?" he asked, as she pushed past him.

"Because — I'd rather not. Stay here!" In a moment she was descending the stairs.

John listened at the open door, and heard the latch turned, and immediately afterwards the sound of a man's voice, which he recognized as that of Doctor Routh. The doctor had been one of the Admiral's firmest friends, and was, moreover, a man of very great reputation in New York. It was improbable that, except for some matter of life and death, any one but Mrs. Ralston could have got him to leave his fireside at midnight and in such weather.

"It's an awful night, Mrs. Ralston," John heard him say, and the words were accompanied by a stamping of feet, followed by the unmistakable soft noise of india-rubber overshoes kicked off, one after the other, upon the marble floor of the entry.

John retired into his room again, leaving the door open, and waited before the fireplace. Far down below he could hear the voices of his mother

and Doctor Routh. They were evidently talking the matter over before coming up. Then their soft tread upon the carpeted stairs told him that they were on their way to his room.

Mrs. Ralston entered first, and stood aside to let the doctor pass her before she closed the door. Doctor Routh was enormously tall. He wore a long white beard, and carried his head very much bent forward. His eyes were of the very dark blue which is sometimes called violet, and when he was looking directly in front of him, the white was visible below the iris. He had delicate hands, but was otherwise rough in appearance, and walked with a heavy tread and a long stride, as a strong man marches with a load on his back.

He stopped before John, looked keenly at him, and smiled. He had known him since he had been a boy.

"Well, young man," he said, "you look pretty badly used up. What's the matter with you?"

"Have I been drinking, doctor? That's the question." John did not smile as he shook hands.

"I don't know," answered the physician. "Let me look at you."

He was holding the young man's hand, and pressing it gently, as though to judge of its temperature. He made him sit down under the bright gas-light by the dressing table, and began to examine him carefully.

Mrs. Ralston turned her back to them both, and leaned against the mantelpiece. There was something horrible to her in the idea of such an examination for such a purpose. There was something far more horrible still in the verdict which she knew must fall from the doctor's lips within the next five minutes — the words which must assure her that John had lied to her on his word of honour. She had no hope now. She had watched the doctor nervously when he had entered the room, and when he had spoken to John she had seen the smile on his face. There had been no doubt in his mind from the first, and he was amused — probably at the bare idea that any one could look as John looked who had not been very drunk indeed within the last few hours. Presently he would look grave and shake his head, and probably give John a bit of good advice about his habits. She turned her face to the wall above the mantelpiece and waited. It could not take long, she thought. Then it came.

"If you're not careful, my boy —" the doctor began, and stopped.

"What?" asked John, rather anxiously.

Mrs. Ralston felt as though she must stop her ears to keep out the sound of the next words. Yet she knew that she must hear them before it was all over.

"You'll injure yourself," said Doctor Routh,

completing his sentence very slowly and thoughtfully.

"That's of no consequence," answered John. "What I want to know is, whether I have been drinking or not. Yes or no?"

"Drinking?" Doctor Routh laughed contemptuously. "You know as well as I do that you haven't had a drop of anything like drink all day. But you've had nothing to eat, either, for some reason or other — and starvation's a precious deal worse than drinking any day. Drinking be damned! You're starving — that's what's the matter with you. Excuse me, Mrs. Ralston, forgot you were there —"

Mrs. Ralston had heard every word. Her hands dropped together inertly upon the mantelpiece, and she turned her head slowly toward the two men. Her face had a dazed expression, as though she were waking from a dream.

"Never mind the starvation, doctor," said John, with a hard laugh. "There's a Bible somewhere in the room. Perhaps you won't mind swearing on it that I'm sober — before my mother, please."

"I shouldn't think any sane person would need any swearing to convince them!" Doctor Routh seemed to be growing suddenly angry. "You've been badly knocked about, and you've been starving yourself for days — or weeks, very likely. You've had a concussion of the brain that would

have laid up most people for a week, and would have killed some that I know. You're as thin as razor edges all over — there's nothing to you but bone and muscle and nerve. You ought to be fed and put to bed and looked after, and then you ought to be sent out West to drive cattle, or go to sea before the mast for two or three years. Your lungs are your weak point. That's apt to be the trouble with thoroughbreds in this country. Oh — they're sound enough — enough for the present, but you can't go on like this. You'll give out when you don't expect it. Drinking? No! I should think a little whiskey and water would do you good!"

While he was speaking, Mrs. Ralston came slowly forward, listening to every word he said, in wide-eyed wonder. At last she laid her hand upon his arm. He felt the slight pressure and looked down into her eyes.

"Doctor Routh — on your word of honour?" she asked in a low voice.

John laughed very bitterly, rose from his chair, and crossed the room. The old man's eyes flashed suddenly, and he drew himself up.

"My dear Mrs. Ralston, I don't know what has happened to you, nor what you have got into your head. But if you're not satisfied that I'm enough of a doctor to tell whether a man is drunk or sober, send for some one in whom you've more confidence.

I'm not used to going about swearing my professional opinion on Bibles and things, nor to giving my word of honour that I'm in earnest when I've said what I think about a patient. But I'll tell you — if I had fifty words of honour and the whole Bible House to swear on — well, I'll say more — if it were a case of a trial, I'd give my solemn evidence in court that Master John Ralston has had nothing to drink. Upon my word, Mrs. Ralston! Talk of making mountains of mole-hills! You're making a dozen Himalayas out of nothing at all, it seems to me. Your boy's starving, Mrs. Ralston, and I daresay he takes too much champagne and too many cocktails occasionally. But he's not been doing it to-day, nor yesterday, nor the day before. That is my opinion as a doctor. Want my word of honour and the Bible again? Go to bed! Getting your old friend away from his books and his pipe and his fire at this hour, on such a night as this! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, young lady! Well — if I've done you any good, I'm not sorry — but don't do it again. Good night — and get that young fellow out of this as soon as you can. He's not fit for this sort of life, anyhow. Don't take thoroughbreds for cart horses — they stand it for a bit, and then they go crack! Good night — no, I know my way all right — don't come down."

John followed him, however, but before he left

the room he glanced at his mother's face. Her eyes were cast down, and her lips seemed to tremble a little. She did not even say good night to Doctor Routh.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was nearly one o'clock when John Ralston let Doctor Routh out of the house and returned to his own room. He found his mother standing there, opposite the door, as he entered, and her eyes had met his even before he had passed the threshold. She came forward to meet him, and without a word laid her two hands upon his shoulders and hid her face against his torn coat. He put one arm around her and gently stroked her head with the other hand, but he looked straight before him at the bright globe of the gas-light, and said nothing.

There was an unsettled expression on his pale face. He did not wish to seem triumphant, and he did wish that his anger against her might subside immediately and be altogether forgotten. But although he had enough control of his outward self to say nothing and to touch her tenderly, the part of him that had been so deeply wounded was not to be healed in a moment. Her doubt — more, her openly and scornfully outspoken disbelief had been the very last straw that day. It had been hard, just when he had been doing his best to reform, to be accused by every one, from

Hamilton Bright, his friend, to the people on the horse-car; but it had been hardest of all to be accused by his mother, and not to be believed even on his pledged word. That was a very different matter.

To a man of a naturally melancholic and brooding temper, as John Ralston was, illusions have a very great value. Such men have few of them, as a rule, and regard them as possessions with which no one has any right to interfere. They ask little or nothing of the world at large, except to be allowed to follow their own inclinations and worship their own idols in their own way. But of their idols they ask much, and often give them little in return except acts of idolatry. And the first thing they ask, whether they express the demand openly or not, is that their idols should believe in them in spite of every one and everything. They are not, as a rule, capricious men. They cannot replace one object of adoration by another, at short notice. Perhaps the foundation of such characters is a sort of honourable selfishness, a desire to keep what they care for to themselves, beyond the reach of every one else, together with an inward conviction that their love is eminently worth having from the mere fact that they do not bestow it lightly. When the idol expresses a human and pardonable doubt in their sincerity, an illusion is injured, if not destroyed — even when that doubt is well

founded. But when the doubt is groundless, it makes a bad wound which leaves an ugly scar, if it ever heals at all.

John Ralston was very like his mother, and she knew it and understood instinctively that words could be of no use. There was nothing to be done but to throw herself upon his mercy, as it were, and to trust that he would forgive an injury which nothing could repair. And John understood this, and did his best to meet her half way, for he loved her very much. But he could not help the expression on his face, not being good at masking nor at playing any part. She, womanly, could have done that better than he.

She wished to act no comedy, however. The thing was real and true, and she was distressed beyond measure. She looked up at his face and saw what was in his mind, and she knew that for the present she could do nothing. Then she gently kissed the sleeve of his coat, and withdrew her hands from him.

"You're wet, Jack," she said, trying to speak naturally. "Go to bed, and I'll bring you something to eat and something hot to drink."

"No, mother — thank you. I don't want anything. But I think I'll go to bed. Good night."

"Let me bring you something — "

"No, thank you. I'd rather not. It's all right, mother. Don't worry."

It was hard to say even that little, just then, but he did as well as he could. Then he kissed her on the forehead and opened the door for her. She bent her head low as she passed him, but she did not look up.

Half an hour later, when John was about to put out his light, he heard the little clinking of glasses and silver on a tray outside his door. Then there was a knock.

"I've brought you something to eat, Jack," said his mother's voice. "Just what I could find—"

John turned as he was crossing the room — a gaunt figure in his loose, striped flannels — and hesitated a moment before he spoke.

"Oh — thank you, very much," he answered. "Would you kindly set it down? I'll take it in presently. It's very good of you, mother — thank you — good night again."

He heard her set down the tray, and the things rattled and clinked.

"It's here, when you want it," said the voice.

He fancied there was a sigh after the words, and two or three seconds passed before the sound of softly departing footsteps followed. He listened, with a weary look in his eyes, then went to the fireplace and leaned against the mantelpiece for a moment. As though making an effort, he turned again and went to the door and opened it and brought in the tray. There were dainty things on

it, daintily arranged. There was also a small decanter of whiskey, a pint of claret and a little jug of hot water. John set the tray upon one end of his writing table and looked at it, with an odd, sour smile. He was really so tired that he wanted neither food nor drink, and the sight of both in abundance was almost nauseous to him. He reflected that the servant would take away the things in the morning, and that his mother would never know whether he had taken what she had brought him or not, unless she asked him, which was impossible. He took up the tray again, set it down on the floor, in a corner, and instead of going to bed seated himself at his writing table.

It seemed best to write to Katharine and send his letter early in the morning. It was hard work, and he could scarcely see the words he wrote, for the pain in his head was becoming excruciating. It was necessarily a long letter, too, and a complicated one, and his command of the English language seemed gone from him. Nevertheless, he plodded on diligently, telling as nearly as he could remember what had happened to him since he had left Katharine's door at three o'clock in the afternoon, up to the moment when Doctor Routh had pronounced his verdict. It was not well written, but on the whole it was a thoroughly clear account of events, so far as he himself could be said to know what had happened to him. He addressed the let-

ter and put a special delivery stamp upon it, thinking that this would be a means of sending it to its destination quickly without attracting so much attention to it as though he should send a messenger himself. Then he put out the gas, drew up the shades, so that the morning light should wake him early, in spite of his exhaustion, and at last went to bed.

It was unfortunate that the messenger who took the specially stamped letter to Clinton Place on the following morning should have rung the bell exactly when he did, that is to say, at the precise moment when Alexander Junior was putting on his overcoat and overshoes in the entry. It was natural enough that Mr. Lauderdale should open the door himself and confront the boy, who held up the letter to him with the little book in which the receipt was to be signed. It was the worse for the boy, because Katharine would have given him five or ten cents for himself, whereas Alexander Junior signed the receipt, handed it back and shut the door in the boy's face. And it was very much the worse for John Ralston, since Mr. Lauderdale, having looked at the handwriting and recognized it, put the letter into his pocket without a word to any one and went down town for the day.

Now it was his intention to do the thing which was right according to his point of view. He was as honourable a man, in his own unprejudiced opinion,

as any living, and he would no more have forfeited his right to congratulate himself upon his uprightness than he would have given ten cents to the messenger boy, or a holiday to a clerk, or a subscription for anything except his pew in church. The latter was really a subscription to his own character, and therefore not an extravagance. It would never have entered into his mind that he could possibly break the seal of Ralston's specially stamped envelope. The letter was as safe in his pocket as though it had been put away in his own box at the Safe Deposit — where there were so many curious things of which no one but Alexander Junior knew anything. But he did not intend that his daughter should ever read it either. He disapproved of John from the very bottom of his heart, partly because he did, which was an excellent reason, partly because there could be no question as to John's mode of life, and partly because he had once lost his temper when John had managed to keep his own. So far as he allowed himself to swear, he had sworn that John should never marry Katharine — unless, indeed, John should inherit a much larger share of Robert Lauderdale's money than was just, in which case justice itself would make it right to enter into a matrimonial alliance with the millions. Meanwhile, however, Robert the Rich was an exceedingly healthy old man.

Under present circumstances, therefore, if acci-

dent threw into his hands one of Ralston's letters to Katharine, it was clearly the duty of such a perfectly upright and well-conducted father as Alexander Junior to hinder it from reaching its destination. Only one question as to his conduct presented itself to his mind, and he occupied the day in solving it. Should he quietly destroy the letter and say nothing about it to any one, or should he tell Katharine that he had it, and burn it in her presence after showing her that it was unopened? His conscience played an important part in his life, though Robert Lauderdale secretly believed that he had none at all; and his conscience bade him be quite frank about what he had done, and destroy the letter under Katharine's own eyes. He took it from his pocket as he sat in his brilliantly polished chair before his shiny table, under the vivid snow-glare which fell upon him through his magnificent plate-glass windows. He looked at it again, turned it over thoughtfully, and returned it at last to his pocket, where it remained until he came home late in the afternoon. While he sipped his glass of iced water at luncheon time, he prepared a little speech, which he repeated to himself several times in the course of the day.

In the meantime Katharine, not suspecting that John had written to her, and of course utterly ignorant of the truth about his doings on the preceding day, felt that she must find some occupation,

no matter how trivial, to take her mind out of the strong current of painful thought which must at last draw her down into the very vortex of despair's own whirlpool. It seemed to her that she had never before even faintly guessed the meaning of pain nor the unknown extent of possible mental suffering. As for forming any resolution, or even distinguishing the direction of her probable course in the immediate future, she was utterly incapable of any such effort or thought. The longing for total annihilation was perhaps uppermost among her instincts just then, as it often is with men and women who have been at once bitterly disappointed and deeply wounded, and who find themselves in a position from which no escape seems possible. Katharine wished with all her young heart that the world were a lighted candle and that she could blow it out.

It must not be believed, however, that her love for John Ralston had disappeared as suddenly and totally as she should have liked to extinguish the universe. It had not been of sudden growth nor of capricious blooming. Its roots were deep, its stem was strong, its flowers were sweet — and the blight which had fallen upon it was the more cruel. A frostbitten rose-tree is a sadder sight than a withered mushroom or a blade of dried grass. It was real, honest, unsuspecting, strong, maidenly love, and it stood there still in the midst of her heart, hanging

its head in the cold, while she gazed at it and wondered, and choked with anguish. But she could not lift her hand to prop it, nor to cover it and warm it again, still less to root it up and burn it.

She could only try to escape from seeing it, and she resolutely set about making the attempt. She left her room and went downstairs, treading more softly as she passed the door of the room in which her mother worked during the morning hours. She did not wish to see her again at present, and as she descended she could not help thinking with wonder of the sudden and unaccountable change in their relations.

She entered the library, but though it was warm, it had that chilly look about it which rooms principally used in the evening generally have when there is no fire in them. The snow-glare was on everything, too, and made it worse. She stood a moment in hesitation before the writing table, and laid her hand uncertainly upon a sheet of writing paper. But she realized that she could not write to John, and she turned away almost immediately.

What could she have written? It was easy to talk to herself of a letter; it was quite another matter to find words, or even to discover the meaning of her own thoughts. She did not wish to see him. If she wished anything, it was that she might never see him again. Nothing could have been much worse than to meet him just then, and talk-

ing on paper was next to talking in fact. It all rushed back upon her as she moved away, and she paused a moment and steadied herself against her favourite chair by the empty fireplace. Then she raised her head again, proudly, and left the room, looking straight before her.

There was nothing to be done but to go out. The loneliness of the house was absolutely intolerable, and she could not wander about in such an aimless fashion all day long. Again she went upstairs to her room to put on her hat and things. Mechanically she took the hat she had worn on the previous day, but as she stood before the mirror and caught sight of it, she suddenly took it from her head again and threw it behind her with a passionate gesture, stared at herself a moment and then buried her face in her hands. She had unconsciously put on the same frock as yesterday — the frock in which she had been married — it was the rough grey woollen one she had been wearing every day. And there were the same simple little ornaments, the small silver pin at her throat, the tiny gold bar of her thin watch chain at the third button from the top — the hat had made it complete — just as she had been married. She could not bear that.

A few moments later she rose, and without looking at herself in the glass, began to change her clothes. She dressed herself entirely in black, put

on a black hat and a gold pin, and took a new pair of brown gloves from a drawer. There was a relief, now, in her altered appearance, as she fastened her veil. She felt that she could behave differently if she could get rid of the outward things which reminded her of yesterday. It is not wise to reflect contemptuously upon the smallness of things which influence passionate people at great moments in their lives. It needs less to send a fast express off the track, if the obstacle be just so placed as to cause an accident, than it does to upset a freight train going at twelve miles an hour.

Katharine descended the stairs again with a firm step, holding her head higher than before, and with quite a different look in her eyes. She had put on a sort of shell with her black clothes. It seemed to conceal her real self from the outer world, the self that had worn rough grey woollen and a silver pin and had been married to John Ralston yesterday morning. She did not even take the trouble to tread softly as she passed her mother's studio, for she felt able to face any one, all at once. If John himself had been standing in the entry below, and if she had come upon him suddenly, she should have known how to meet him, and what to say. She would have hurt him, and she would have been glad of it, with all of her. What right had John Ralston to ruin her life?

But John was not there, nor was there any pos-

sibility of her meeting him that morning. He had shut himself up in his room and was waiting for her answer to the letter which Alexander Lauderdale had taken down town in his pocket, and which he meant to burn before her eyes that evening after delivering his little speech. It was not probable that John would go out of the house until he was convinced that no answer was to be expected.

Katharine went out into the street and paused on the last step. The snow was deep everywhere, and wet and clinging. No attempt had as yet been made to clear it away, though the horse-cars had ploughed their black channel through, and it had been shovelled off the pavements before some of the houses. There was a slushy muddiness about it where it was not still white, which promised ill for a walk. Katharine knew exactly what Washington Square would be like on such a morning. The little birds would all be draggled and cold, the leafless twigs would be dripping, the paths would be impracticable, and all the American boys would be snowballing the Italian and French boys from South Fifth Avenue. The University Building would look more than usual like a sepulchre to let, and Waverley Place would be more savagely respectable than ever, as its quiet red brick houses fronted the snow. Overhead the sky was of a uniform grey. It was impossible to tell from any increase of light where the sun ought to be. The air was damp and cold,

and all the noises of the street were muffled. Far away and out of sight, a hand-organ was playing 'Ah quell' amore ond'ardo'—an air which Katharine most especially and heartily detested. There was something ghostly in the sound, as though the wretched instrument were grinding itself to death out of sheer weariness. Katharine thought that if the world were making music in its orbit that morning, the noise must be as melancholy and as jarring as that of the miserable hurdy-gurdy. She thought vaguely, too, of the poor old man who has stood every day for years with his back to the railings on the south side of West Fourteenth Street, before you come to Sixth Avenue, feebly turning the handle of a little box which seems to be full of broken strings, which something stirs up into a scarcely audible jangle at every sixth or seventh revolution. He has yellowish grey hair, long and thick, and is generally bareheaded. She felt inclined to go and see whether he were there now, in the wet snow, with his torn shoes and his blind eyes, that could not feel the glare. She found herself thinking of all the many familiar figures of distress, just below the surface of the golden stream as it were, looking up out of it with pitiful appealing faces, and without which New York could not be itself. Her father said they made a good living out of their starving appearance, and firmly refused to encourage what he called pau-

perism by what other people called charity. Even if they were really poor, he said, they probably deserved to be, and were only reaping the fruit of their own improvidence, a deduction which did not appeal to Katharine.

She turned eastwards and would have walked up to Fourteenth Street in order to give the hurdy-gurdy beggar something, had she not remembered almost immediately that she had no money with her. She never had any except what her mother gave her for her small expenses, and during the last few days she had not cared to ask for any. In very economically conducted families the reluctance to ask for small sums is generally either the sign of a quarrel or the highest expression of sympathetic consideration. Every family has its private barometer in which money takes the place of mercury.

Katharine suddenly remembered that she had promised Crowdie another sitting at eleven o'clock on Friday. It was the day and it was the hour, and though by no means sure that she would enter the house when she reached Lafayette Place, she turned in that direction and walked on, picking her way across the streets as well as she could. The last time she had gone to Crowdie's she had gone with John, who had left her at the door in order to go in search of a clergyman. She remembered that, as she went along, and she chose the

side of the street opposite to the one on which she had gone with Ralston.

At the door of Crowdie's house, she hesitated again. Crowdie was one of the gossips. It was he who had told the story of John's quarrel with Bright. It seemed as though he must be more repulsive to her than ever. On the other hand, she realized that if she failed to appear as she had promised, he would naturally connect her absence with what had happened to Ralston. He could hardly be blamed for that, she thought, but she would not have such a story repeated if she could help it. She felt very brave, and very unlike the Katharine Lauderdale of two hours earlier, and after a moment's thought, she rang the bell and was admitted immediately.

Hester Crowdie was just coming down the stairs, and greeted Katharine before reaching her. She seemed annoyed about something, Katharine thought. There was a little bright colour in her pale cheeks, and her dark eyes gleamed angrily.

"I'm so glad you've come!" she exclaimed, helping her friend to take off her heavy coat. "Come in with me for a minute, won't you?"

"What's the matter?" asked Katharine, going with her into the little front room. "You look angry."

"Oh — it's nothing! I'm so foolish, you know. It's silly of me. Sit down."

"What is it, dear?" asked Katharine, affectionately, as she sat down beside Hester upon a little sofa. "Have you and he been quarrelling?"

"Quarrelling!" Hester laughed gaily. "No, indeed. That's impossible! No — we were all by ourselves — Walter was singing over his work, and I was just lying amongst the cushions and listening and thinking how heavenly it was — and that stupid Mr. Griggs came in and spoiled it all. So I came away in disgust. I was so angry, just for a minute — I could have killed him!"

"Poor dear!" Katharine could not help smiling at the story.

"Oh, of course, you laugh at me. Everybody does. But what do I care? I love him — and I love his voice, and I love to be all alone with him up there under the sky — and at night, too, when there's a full moon — you have no idea how beautiful it is. And then I always think that the snowy days, when I can't go out on foot, belong especially to me. You're different — I knew you were coming at eleven — but that horrid Mr. Griggs!"

"Poor Mr. Griggs! If he could only hear you!"

"Walter pretends to like him. That's one of the few points on which we shall never agree. There's nothing against him, I know, and he's rather modest, considering how he has been talked about — and all that. But one doesn't like one's hus-

band's old friends to come — bothering — you know, and getting in the way when one wants to be alone with him. Oh, no! I've nothing against the poor man — only that I hate him! How are you, dearest, after the ball, last night? You seemed awfully tired when I brought you home. As for me, I'm worn out. I never closed my eyes till Walter came home — he danced the cotillion with your mother. Didn't you think he was looking ill? I did. There was one moment when I was just a little afraid that — you know — that something might happen to him — as it did the other day — did you notice anything?"

"No," answered Katharine, thoughtfully. "He's naturally pale. Don't you think that just happened once, and isn't likely to occur again? He's been perfectly well ever since Monday, hasn't he?"

"Oh, yes — perfectly. But you know it's always on my mind, now. I want to be with him more than ever. I suppose that accounts for my being so angry with poor Mr. Griggs. I think I'd ask him to stay to luncheon if I were sure he'd go away the minute it's over. Shouldn't you like to stay, dear? Shall I ask him? That will just make four. Do! I shall feel that I've atoned for being so horrid about him. I wish you would!"

Katharine did not answer at once. The vision of her luncheon at home rose disagreeably before her — there would be her mother and her grand-

father, and probably Charlotte. The latter was quite sure to have heard something about John, and would, of course, seize the occasion to make unpleasant remarks. This consideration was a decisive argument.

"Dear," she said at last, "if you really want me, I think I will stay. Only — I don't want to be in the way, like Mr. Griggs. You must send me away when you've had enough of me."

"Katharine! What an idea! I only wish you would stay forever."

"Oh, no, you don't!" answered Katharine, with a smile.

Hester rang the bell, and the immaculate and magnificent Fletcher appeared to receive her orders about the luncheon. Katharine meanwhile began to wonder at herself. She was so unlike what she had been a few hours earlier, in the early morning, alone in her room. She wondered whether, after all, she were not heartless, or whether the memory of all that had lately happened to her might not be softened, like that of a bad dream, which is horrible while it lasts, and at which one laughs at breakfast, knowing that it has had no reality. Had her marriage any reality? Last night, before the ball, the question would have seemed blasphemous. It presented itself quite naturally just now. What value had that contract? What power had the words of any man, priest or layman, to tie her

forever to one who had not the common decency to behave like a gentleman, and to keep his appointment with her on the same evening — on the evening of their wedding day? Was there a mysterious magic in the mere words, which made them like a witch's spell in a fairy story? She had not seen him since. What was he doing? Had he not even enough respect for her to send her a line of apology? Merely what any man would have sent who had missed an appointment? Had she sold her soul into bondage for the term of her natural life by uttering two words — 'I will'? It was only her soul, after all. She had not seen his face save for a moment at her own door in the afternoon. Did he think that since they had been married he need not have even the most common consideration for her? It seemed so. What had she dreamed, what had she imagined during all those weeks and months before last Monday, while she had been making up her mind that she would sacrifice anything and everything for the sake of making him happy? She could not be mistaken, now, for she was thinking it all over quite coldly during these two minutes, while Hester was speaking to the butler. She was more than cold. She was indifferent. She could have gone back to her room and put on her grey frock, and the little silver pin again, and could have looked at herself in the mirror for an hour without any sensation

but that of wonder — amazement at her own folly.

Talk of love! There was love between Walter Crowdie and his wife. Hester could not be with any one for five minutes without speaking of him, and as for Crowdie himself, he was infatuated. Everybody said so. Katharine pardoned him his pale face, his red lips, and the incomprehensible repulsion she felt for him, because he loved his wife.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Katharine and Hester went up to the studio together, and Hester opened the door.

"I've brought your sitter, Walter," she said, announcing Katharine. "I've come back with a reinforcement."

"Oh, Miss Lauderdale, how do you do?" Crowdie came forward. "Do you know Mr. Griggs?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes, he was introduced to me last night," explained Katharine in an undertone, and bending her head graciously as the elderly man bowed from a distance.

"Oh! that's very nice," observed Crowdie. "I didn't know whether you had met. I hate introducing people. They're apt to remember it against one. Griggs is an old friend, Miss Lauderdale."

Katharine looked at the painter and thought he was less repulsive than usual.

"I know," she answered. "Do you really want me to sit this morning, Mr. Crowdie? You know, we said Friday —"

"Of course I do! There's your chair, all ready for you — just where it was last time. And the

thing — it isn't a picture yet — is in the corner here. Hester, dear, just help Miss Lauderdale to take off her hat, won't you?"

He crossed the room as he spoke, and began to wheel up the easel on which Katharine's portrait stood. Griggs said nothing, but watched the two women as they stood together, trying to understand the very opposite impressions they made upon him, and wondering with an excess of cynicism which Crowdie thought the more beautiful. For his own part, he fancied that he should prefer Hester's face and Katharine's character, as he judged it from her appearance.

Presently Katharine seated herself, trying to assume the pose she had taken at the first sitting. Crowdie disappeared behind the curtain in search of paint and brushes, and Hester sat down on the edge of a huge divan. As there was no chair except Katharine's, Griggs seated himself on the divan beside Mrs. Crowdie.

"There's never more than one chair here," she explained. "It's for the sitter, or the buyer, or the lion-hunter, according to the time of day. Other people must sit on the divan or on the floor."

"Yes," answered Griggs. "I see."

Katharine did not think the answer a very brilliant one for a man of such reputation. Hitherto she had not had much experience of lions. Crowdie came back with his palette and paints.

"That's almost it," he said, looking at Katharine. "A little more to the left, I think — just the shade of a shadow!"

"So?" asked Katharine, turning her head a very little.

"Yes — only for a moment — while I look at you. Afterwards you needn't keep so very still."

"Yes — I know. The same as last time."

Meanwhile, Hester remembered that she had not yet asked Griggs to stay to luncheon, though she had taken it for granted that he would.

"Won't you stay and lunch with us?" she asked. "Miss Lauderdale says she will, and I've told them to set a place for you. We shall be four. Do, if you can!"

"You're awfully kind, Mrs. Crowdie," answered Griggs. "I wish I could. I believe I have an engagement."

"Oh, of course you have. But that's no reason." Hester spoke with great conviction. "I daresay you made that particular engagement very much against your will. At all events, you mean to stay, because you only say you 'believe' you're engaged. If you didn't mean to stay, you would say at once that you 'had' an engagement which you couldn't break. Wouldn't you? Therefore you will."

"That's a remarkable piece of logic," observed Griggs, smiling.

"Besides, you're a lion just now, because you've been away so long. So you can break as many engagements as you please — it won't make any difference."

"There's a plain and unadorned contempt for social rules in that, which appeals to me. Thanks; if you'll let me, I'll stay."

"Of course!" Hester laughed. "You see I'm married to a lion, so I know just what lions do. Walter, Katharine and Mr. Griggs are going to stay to luncheon."

"I'm delighted," answered Crowdie, from behind his easel. He was putting in background with an enormous brush. "I say, Griggs —" he began again.

"Well?"

"Do you like Rockaways or Blue Points? I'm sure Hester has forgotten."

"'When love was the pearl of' my 'oyster,' I used to prefer Blue Points," answered Griggs, meditatively.

"So does Walter," said Mrs. Crowdie.

"Was that a quotation — or what?" asked Katharine, speaking to Crowdie in an undertone.

"Swinburne," answered the painter, indistinctly, for he had one of his brushes between his teeth.

"Not that it makes any difference what a man eats," observed Griggs in the same thoughtful tone. "I once lived for five weeks on ship biscuit and raw apples."

"Good heavens!" laughed Hester. "Where was that? In a shipwreck?"

"No; in New York. It wasn't bad. I used to eat a pound a day — there were twelve to a pound of the white pilot-bread, and four apples."

"Do you mean to say that you were deliberately starving yourself? What for?"

"Oh, no! I had no money, and I wanted to write a book, so that I couldn't get anything for my work till it was done. It wasn't like little jobs that one's paid for at once."

"How funny!" exclaimed Hester. "Did you hear that, Walter?" she asked.

"Yes; but he's done all sorts of things."

"Were you ever as hard up as that, Walter?"

"Not for so long; but I've had my days. Haven't I, Griggs? Do you remember — in Paris — when we tried to make an omelet without eggs, by the recipe out of the 'Noble Booke of Cookerie,' and I wanted to colour it with yellow ochre, and you said it was poisonous? I've often thought that if we'd had some saffron, it would have turned out better."

"You cooked it too much," answered Griggs, gravely. "It tasted like an old binding of a book — all parchment and leathery. There's nothing in that recipe anyhow. You can't make an omelet without eggs. I got hold of the book again, and copied it out and persuaded the great man at

Voisin's to try it. But he couldn't do anything with it. It wasn't much better than ours."

"I'm glad to know that," said Crowdie. "I've often thought of it and wondered whether we hadn't made some mistake."

Katharine was amused by what the two men said. She had supposed that a famous painter and a well-known writer, who probably did not spend a morning together more than two or three times a year, would talk profoundly of literature and art. But it was interesting, nevertheless, to hear them speak of little incidents which threw a side-light on their former lives.

"Do people who succeed always have such a dreadfully hard time of it?" she asked, addressing the question to both men.

"Oh, I suppose most of them do," answered Crowdie, indifferently.

"'Jordan's a hard road to travel,'" observed Griggs, mechanically.

"Sing it, Walter — it is so funny!" suggested Hester.

"What?" asked the painter.

"'Jordan's a hard road' —"

"Oh, I can't sing and paint. Besides, we're driving Miss Lauderdale distracted. Aren't we, Miss Lauderdale?"

"Not at all. I like to hear you two talk — as you wouldn't to a reporter, for instance. Tell me

something more about what you did in Paris. Did you live together?"

"Oh, dear, no! Griggs was a sort of little great man already in those days, and he used to stay at Meurice's — except when he had no money, and then he used to sleep in the Calais train — he got nearly ten hours in that way — and he had a free pass — coming back to Paris in time for breakfast. He got smashed once, and then he gave it up."

"That's pure invention, Crowdie," said Griggs.

"Oh, I know it is. But it sounds well, and we always used to say it was true because you were perpetually rushing backwards and forwards. Oh, no, Miss Lauderdale — Griggs had begun to 'arrive' then, but I was only a student. You don't suppose we're the same age, do you?"

"Oh, Walter!" exclaimed Hester, as though the suggestion were an insult.

"Yes, Griggs is — how old are you, Griggs? I've forgotten. About fifty, aren't you?"

"About fifty thousand, or thereabouts," answered the literary man, with a good-humoured smile.

Katharine looked at him, turning completely round, for he and Mrs. Crowdie were sitting on the divan behind her. She thought his face was old, especially the eyes and the upper part, but his figure had the sinewy elasticity of youth even as he sat there, bending forward, with his hands folded on his knees. She wished she might be with him

alone for a while, for she longed to make him talk about himself.

"You always seemed the same age, to me, even then," said Crowdie.

"Does Mr. Crowdie mean that you were never young, Mr. Griggs?" asked Katharine, who had resumed her pose and was facing the artist.

"We neither of us mean anything," said Crowdie, with a soft laugh.

"That's reassuring!" exclaimed Katharine, a little annoyed, for Crowdie laughed as though he knew more about Griggs than he could or would tell.

"I believe it's the truth," said Griggs himself. "We don't mean anything especial, except a little chaff. It's so nice to be idiotic and not to have to make speeches."

"I hate speeches," said Katharine. "But what I began by asking was this. Must people necessarily have a very hard time in order to succeed at anything? You're both successful men — you ought to know."

"They say that the wives of great men have the hardest time," said Griggs. "What do you think, Mrs. Crowdie?"

"Be reasonable!" exclaimed Hester. "Answer Miss Lauderdale's question — if any one can, you can."

"It depends —" answered Griggs, thoughtfully. "Christopher Columbus —"

"Oh, I don't mean Christopher Columbus, nor any one like him!" Katharine laughed, but a little impatiently. "I mean modern people, like you two."

"Oh — modern people. I see." Mr. Griggs spoke in a very absent tone.

"Don't be so hopelessly dull, Griggs!" protested Crowdie. "You're here to amuse Miss Lauderdale."

"Yes — I know I am. I was thinking just then. Please don't think me rude, Miss Lauderdale. You asked rather a big question."

"Oh — I didn't mean to put you to the trouble of thinking —"

"By the bye, Miss Lauderdale," interrupted Crowdie, "you're all in black to-day, and on Wednesday you were in grey. It makes a good deal of difference, you know, if we are to go on. Which is to be in the picture? We must decide now, if you don't mind."

"What a fellow you are, Crowdie!" exclaimed Griggs.

"I'll have it black, if it's the same to you," said Katharine, answering the painter's question.

"What are you abusing me for, Griggs?" asked Crowdie, looking round his easel.

"For interrupting. You always do. Miss Lauderdale asked me a question, and you sprang at me like a fiery and untamed wild-cat because I didn't

answer it — and then you interrupt and begin to talk about dress."

"I didn't suppose you had finished thinking already," answered Crowdie, calmly. "It generally takes you longer. All right. Go ahead. The curtain's up! The anchor's weighed — all sorts of things! I'm listening. Miss Lauderdale, if you could look at me for one moment — "

"There you go again!" exclaimed Griggs.

"Bless your old heart, man — I'm working, and you're doing nothing. I have the right of way. Haven't I, Miss Lauderdale?"

"Of course," answered Katharine. "But I want to hear Mr. Griggs — "

"'Griggs on Struggles' — it sounds like the title of a law book," observed Crowdie.

"You seem playful this morning," said Griggs. "What makes you so terribly pleasant?"

"The sight of you, my dear fellow, writhing under Miss Lauderdale's questions."

"Doesn't Mr. Griggs like to be asked general questions?" enquired Katharine, innocently.

"It's not that, Miss Lauderdale," said Griggs, answering her question. "It's not that. I'm a fidgety old person, I suppose, and I don't like to answer at random, and your question is a very big one. Not as a matter of fact. It's perfectly easy to say yes, or no, just as one feels about it, or according to one's own experience. In that way, I should

be inclined to say that it's a matter of accident and circumstances — whether men who succeed have to go through many material difficulties or not. You don't hear much of all those who struggle and never succeed, or who are heard of for a moment and then sink. They're by far the most numerous. Lots of successful men have never been poor, if that's what you mean by hard times — even in art and literature. Michael Angelo, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Chaucer, Montaigne, Goethe, Byron — you can name any number who never went through anything like what nine students out of ten in Paris, for instance, suffer cheerfully. It certainly does not follow that because a man is great he must have starved at one time or another. The very greatest seem, as a rule, to have had fairly comfortable homes with everything they could need, unless they had extravagant tastes. That's the material view of the question. The answer is reasonable enough. It's a disadvantage to begin very poor, because energy is used up in fighting poverty which might be used in attacking intellectual difficulties. No doubt the average man, whose faculties are not extraordinary to begin with, may develop them wonderfully, and even be very successful — from sheer necessity, sheer hunger; when, if he were comfortably off, he would do nothing in the world but lie on his back in the sunshine, and smoke a pipe, and criticise other people. But to a man who

"'That's good, Crowdie,' he said thoughtfully. 'It's distinctly good.'" — Vol. II., p. 189.

is naturally so highly gifted that he would produce good work under any circumstances, poverty is a drawback."

"You didn't know what you were going to get, Miss Lauderdale, when you prevailed on Griggs to answer a serious question," said Crowdie, as Griggs paused a moment. "He's a didactic old bird, when he mounts his hobby."

"There's something wrong about that metaphor, Crowdie," observed Griggs. "Bird mounting hobby — you know."

"Did you never see a crow on a cow's back?" enquired Crowdie, unmoved. "Or on a sheep? It's funny when he gets his claws caught in the wool."

"Go on, please, Mr. Griggs," said Katharine. "It's very interesting. What's the other side of the question?"

"Oh — I don't know!" Griggs rose abruptly from his seat and began to pace the room. "It's lots of things, I suppose. Things we don't understand and never shall — in this world."

"But in the other world, perhaps," suggested Crowdie, with a smile which Katharine did not like.

"The other world is the inside of this one," said Griggs, coming up to the easel and looking at the painting. "That's good, Crowdie," he said, thoughtfully. "It's distinctly good. I mean that it's like,

that's all. Of course, I don't know anything about painting — that's your business."

"Of course it is," answered Crowdie; "I didn't ask you to criticise. But I'm glad if you think it's like."

"Yes. Don't mind my telling you, Crowdie — Miss Lauderdale, I hope you'll forgive me — there's a slight irregularity in the pupil of Miss Lauderdale's right eye — it isn't exactly round. It affects the expression. Do you see?"

"I never noticed it," said Katharine in surprise.

"By Jove — you're right!" exclaimed Crowdie. "What eyes you have, Griggs!"

"It doesn't affect your sight in the least," said Griggs, "and nobody would notice it, but it affects the expression all the same."

"You saw it at once," remarked Katharine.

"Oh — Griggs sees everything," answered Crowdie. "He probably observed the fact last night when he was introduced to you, and has been thinking about it ever since."

"Now you've interrupted him again," said Katharine. "Do sit down again, Mr. Griggs, and go on with what you were saying — about the other side of the question."

"The question of success?"

"Yes — and difficulties — and all that."

"Delightfully vague — 'all that'! I can only give you an idea of what I mean. The question of

success involves its own value, and the ultimate happiness of mankind. Do you see how big it is? It goes through everything, and it has no end. What is success? Getting ahead of other people, I suppose. But in what direction? In the direction of one's own happiness, presumably. Every one has a prime and innate right to be happy. Ideas about happiness differ. With most people it's a matter of taste and inherited proclivities. All schemes for making all mankind happy in one direction must fail. A man is happy when he feels that he has succeeded — the sportsman when he has killed his game, the parson when he believes he has saved a soul. We can't all be parsons, nor all good shots. There must be variety. Happiness is success, in each variety, and nothing else. I mean, of course, belief in one's own success, with a reasonable amount of acknowledgment. It's of much less consequence to Crowdie, for instance, what you think, or I think, or Mrs. Crowdie thinks about that picture, than it is to himself. But our opinion has a certain value for him. With an amateur, public opinion is everything, or nearly everything. With a good professional it is quite secondary, because he knows much better than the public can, whether his work is good or bad. He himself is his world — the public is only his weather, fine one day and rainy the next. He prefers his world in fine weather, but even when

it rains he would not exchange it for any other. He's his own king, kingdom and court. He's his own enemy, his own conqueror, and his own captive — slave is a better word. In the course of time he may even become perfectly indifferent to the weather in his world — that is, to the public. And if he can believe that he is doing a good work, and if he can keep inside his own world, he will probably be happy."

"But if he goes beyond it?" asked Katharine.

"He will probably be killed — body or soul, or both," said Griggs, with a queer change of tone.

"It seems to me that you exclude women altogether from your paradise," observed Mrs. Crowdie, with a laugh.

"And amateurs," said her husband. "It's to be a professional paradise for men — no admittance except on business. No one who hasn't had a picture on the line need apply. Special hell for minor poets. Crowns of glory may be had on application at the desk — fit not guaranteed in cases of swelled head —"

"Don't be vulgar, Crowdie," interrupted Griggs.

"Is 'swelled head' vulgar, Miss Lauderdale?" enquired the painter.

"It sounds like something horrid — mumps, or that sort of thing. What does it mean?"

"It means a bad case of conceit. It's a good New York expression. I wonder you haven't heard

it. Go on about the professional persons, Griggs. I'm not half good enough to chaff you. I wish Frank Miner were here. He's the literary man in the family."

"Little Frank Miner — the brother of the three Miss Miners?" asked Griggs.

"Yes — looks a well-dressed cock sparrow — always in a good humour — don't you know him?"

"Of course I do — the brother of the three Miss Miners," said Griggs, meditatively. "Does he write? I didn't know." Crowdie laughed, and Hester smiled.

"Such is fame!" exclaimed Crowdie. "But then, literary men never seem to have heard of each other."

"No," answered Griggs. "By the bye, Crowdie, have you heard anything of Chang-Li-Ho lately?"

"Chang-Li-Ho? Who on earth is he? A Chinese laundryman?"

"No," replied Griggs, unmoved. "He's the greatest painter in the Chinese Empire. But then, you painters never seem to have heard of one another."

"By Jove! that's not fair, Griggs! Is he to be in the professional heaven, too?"

"I suppose so. There'll probably be more Chinamen than New Yorkers there. They know a great deal more about art."

"You're getting deucedly sarcastic, Griggs,"

observed Crowdie. "You'd better tell Miss Lauderdale more about the life to come. Your hobby can't be tired yet, and if you ride him industriously, it will soon be time for luncheon."

"We'd better have it at once if you two are going to quarrel," suggested Hester, with a laugh.

"Oh, we never quarrel," answered Crowdie. "Besides, I've got no soul, Griggs says, and he sold his own to the printer's devil ages ago — so that the life to come is a perfectly safe subject."

"What do you mean by saying that Walter has no soul?" asked Hester, looking up quickly at Griggs.

"My dear lady," he answered, "please don't be so terribly angry with me. In the first place, I said it in fun; and secondly, it's quite true; and thirdly, it's very lucky for him that he has none."

"Are you joking now, or are you unintentionally funny?" asked Crowdie.

"I don't think it's very funny to be talking about people having no souls," said Katharine.

"Do you think every one has a soul, Miss Lauderdale?" asked Griggs, beginning to walk about again.

"Yes — of course. Don't you?"

Griggs looked at her a moment in silence, as though he were hesitating as to what he should say.

"Can you see the soul, as you did the defect in my eyes?" asked Katharine, smiling.

"Sometimes — sometimes one almost fancies that one might."

"And what do you see in mine, may I ask? A defect?"

He was quite near to her. She looked up at him earnestly with her pure girl's eyes, wide, grey and honest. The fresh pallor of her skin was thrown into relief by the black she wore, and her features by the rich stuff which covered the high back of the chair. There was a deeper interest in her expression than Griggs often saw in the faces of those with whom he talked, but it was not that which fascinated him. There was something suggestive of holy things, of innocent suffering, of the romance of a virgin martyr — something which, perhaps, took him back to strange sights he had seen in his youth.

He stood looking down into her eyes, a gaunt, world-worn fighter of fifty years, with a strong, ugly, determined but yet kindly face — the face of a man who has passed beyond a certain barrier which few men ever reach at all.

Crowdie dropped his hand, holding his brush, and gazing at the two in silent and genuine delight. The contrast was wonderful, he thought. He would have given much to paint them as they were before him, with their expressions — with the very thoughts of which the look in each face was born. Whatever Crowdie might be at heart, he was an artist first.

And Hester watched them, too, accustomed to notice whatever struck her husband's attention. A very different nature was hers from any of the three — one reserved for an unusual destiny, and with something of fate's shadowy painting already in all her outward self — passionate, first, and having, also, many qualities of mercy and cruelty at passion's command, but not having anything of the keen insight into the world spiritual, and material, which in varied measure belonged to each of the others.

"And what defect do you see in my soul?" asked Katharine, her exquisite lips just parting in a smile.

"Forgive me!" exclaimed Griggs, as though roused from a reverie. "I didn't realize that I was staring at you." He was an oddly natural man at certain times. Katharine almost laughed.

"I didn't realize it either," she answered. "I was too much interested in what I thought you were going to say."

"He's a very clever fellow, Miss Lauderdale," said Crowdie, going on with his painting. "But you'll turn his head completely. To be so much interested — not in what he has said, or is saying, or even is going to say, but just in what you think he possibly may say — it's amazing! Griggs, you're not half enough flattered! But then, you're so spoilt!"

"Yes — in my old age, people are spoiling me." Griggs smiled rather sourly. "I can't read souls, Miss Lauderdale," he continued. "But if I could, I should rather read yours than most books. It has something to say."

"It's impossible to be more vague, I'm sure," observed Crowdie.

"It's impossible to be more flattering," said Katharine, quietly. "Thank you, Mr. Griggs."

She was beginning to be tired of Crowdie's observations upon what Griggs said — possibly because she was beginning to like Griggs himself more than she had expected.

"I didn't mean to be either vague or flattering. It's servile to be the one and weak to be the other. I said what I thought. Do you call it flattery to paint a beautiful portrait of Miss Lauderdale?"

"Not unless I make it more beautiful than she is," answered the painter.

"You can't."

"That's decisive, at all events," laughed Crowdie. "Not but that I agree with you, entirely."

"Oh, I don't mean it as you do," answered Griggs. "That would be flattery — exactly what I don't mean. Miss Lauderdale is perfectly well aware that you're a great portrait painter and that she is not altogether the most beautiful young lady living at the present moment. You mean flesh and blood and eyes and hair. I don't. I mean all that

flesh and blood and eyes and hair don't mean, and never can mean."

"Soul," suggested Crowdie. "I was talking about that to Miss Lauderdale the last time she sat for me — that was on Wednesday, wasn't it — the day before yesterday? It seems like last year, for some reason or other. Yes, I know what you mean. You needn't get into such a state of frenzied excitement."

"I appeal to you, Mrs. Crowdie — was I talking excitedly?"

"A little," answered Hester, who was incapable of disagreeing with her husband.

"Oh — well — I daresay," said Griggs. "It hasn't been my weakness in life to get excited, though." He laughed.

"Walter always makes you talk, Mr. Griggs," answered Mrs. Crowdie.

"A great deal too much. I think I shall be rude, and not stay to luncheon, after all."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Crowdie. "Don't go in for being young and eccentric — the 'man of genius' style, who runs in and out like a hen in a thunder-storm, and is in everybody's way when he's not wanted and can't be found when people want him. You've outgrown that sort of absurdity long ago."

Katharine would have liked to see Griggs' face at that moment, but he was behind her again.

There was something in the relation of the two men which she found it hard to understand. Crowdie was much younger than Griggs — fourteen or fifteen years, she fancied, and Griggs did not seem to be at all the kind of man with whom people would naturally be familiar or take liberties, to use the common phrase. Yet they talked together like a couple of schoolboys. She should not have thought, either, that they could be mutually attracted. Yet they appeared to have many ideas in common, and to understand each other wonderfully well. Crowdie was evidently not repulsive to Griggs as he was to many men she knew — to Bright and Miner, for instance — and the two had undoubtedly been very intimate in former days. Nevertheless, it was strange to hear the younger man, who was little more than a youth in appearance, comparing the celebrated Paul Griggs to a hen in a thunder-storm, and still stranger to see that Griggs did not resent it at all. An older woman might have unjustly suspected that the elderly man of letters was in love with Hester Crowdie, but such an idea could never have crossed Katharine's mind. In that respect she was singularly unsophisticated. She had been accustomed to see her beautiful mother surrounded and courted by men of all ages, and she knew that her mother was utterly indifferent to them except in so far as she liked to be admired. In some books, men fall

in love with married women, and Katharine had always been told that those were bad books, and had accepted the fact without question and without interest.

But in ordinary matters she was keen of perception. It struck her that there was some bond or link between the two men, and it seemed strange to her that there should be — as strange as though she had seen an old wolf playing amicably with a little rabbit. She thought of the two animals in connection with the two men.

While she had been thinking, Hester and Griggs had been talking together in lower tones, on the divan, and Crowdie had been painting industriously.

"It's time for luncheon," said Mrs. Crowdie. "Mr. Griggs says he really must go away very early, and perhaps, if Katharine will stay, she will let you paint for another quarter of an hour afterward."

"I wish you would!" answered Crowdie, with alacrity. "The snow-light is so soft — you see the snow lies on the skylight like a blanket."

Katharine looked up at the glass roof, turning her head far back, for it was immediately overhead. When she dropped her eyes she saw that Griggs was looking at her again, but he turned away instantly. She had no sensation of unpleasantness, as she always had when she met Crowdie's womanish glance; but she wondered about the man and his past.

Hester was just leaving the studio, going downstairs to be sure that luncheon was ready, and Crowdie had disappeared behind his curtain to put his palette and brushes out of sight, as usual. Katharine was alone with Griggs for a few moments. They stood together, looking at the portrait.

"How long have you known Mr. Crowdie?" she asked, yielding to an irresistible impulse.

"Crowdie?" repeated Griggs. "Oh — a long time — fifteen or sixteen years, I should think. That's going to be a very good portrait, Miss Lauderdale — one of his best. And Crowdie, at his best, is first rate."

CHAPTER XXV.

Katharine was conscious that during the time she had spent in the studio she had been taken out of herself. She had listened to what the others had said, she had been interested in Griggs, she had speculated upon the probable origin of his apparent friendship with Crowdie; in a word, she had temporarily lulled the tempest which had threatened to overwhelm her altogether in the earlier part of the morning. She was not much given to analyzing herself and her feelings, but as she descended the stairs, followed by Crowdie and Griggs, she was inclined to doubt whether she were awake, or dreaming. She told herself that it was all true; that she had been married to John Ralston on the previous morning in the quiet, remote church, that she had seen John for one moment in the afternoon, at her own door, that he had failed her in the evening, and that she knew only too certainly how he had disgraced himself in the eyes of decent people during the remainder of the day. It was all true, and yet there was something misty about it all, as though it were a dream. She did not feel angry or hurt any more. It only seemed to

her that John, and everything connected with him, had all at once passed out of her life, beyond the possibility of recall. And she did not wish to recall it, for she had reached something like peace, very unexpectedly.

It was, of course, only temporary. Physically speaking, it might be explained as the reaction from violent emotions, which had left her nerves weary and deadened. And speaking not merely of the material side, it is true that the life of love has moments of suspended animation, during which it is hard to believe that love was ever alive at all — times when love has a past and a future, but no present.

If she had met John at that moment, on the stairs, she would very probably have put out her hand quite naturally, and would have greeted him with a smile, before the reality of all that had happened could come back to her. Many of us have dreamed that those dearest to us have done us some cruel and bitter wrong, struck us, insulted us, trampled on our life-long devotion to them; and in the morning, awaking, we have met them, and smiled, and loved them just the same. For it was only a dream. And there are those who have known the reality; who, after much time, have very suddenly found out that they have been betrayed and wickedly deceived, and used ill, by their most dear — and who, in the first moment,

have met them, and smiled, and loved them just the same. For it was only a dream, they thought indeed. And then comes the waking, which is as though one fell asleep upon his beloved's bosom and awoke among thorns, and having a crown of thorns about his brows — very hard to bear without crying aloud.

Katharine pressed the polished banister of the staircase with her hand, and with the other she found the point of the little gold pin she wore at her throat and made it prick her a little. It was a foolish idea and a childish thought. She knew that she was not really dreaming, and yet, as though she might have been, she wanted a physical sensation to assure her that she was awake. Griggs was close behind her. Crowdie had stopped a moment to pull the cord of a curtain which covered the skylight of the staircase.

"I wonder where real things end, and dreams begin!" said Katharine, half turning her head, and then immediately looking before her again.

"At every minute of every hour," answered Griggs, as quickly as though the thought had been in his own mind.

From higher up came Crowdie's golden voice, singing very softly to himself. He had heard the question and the answer.

"'La vie est un songe,'" he sang, and then, breaking off suddenly, laughed a little and began to descend.

At the first note, Katharine stood still and turned her face upwards. Griggs stopped, too, and looked down at her. Even after Crowdie had laughed Katharine did not move.

"I wish you'd go on, Mr. Crowdie!" she cried, speaking so that he could hear her.

"Griggs is anxious for the Blue Points," he answered, coming down. "Besides, he hates music, and makes no secret of the fact."

"Is it true? Do you really hate music?" asked Katharine, turning and beginning to descend again.

"Quite true," answered Griggs, quietly. "I detest it. Crowdie's a nuisance with his perpetual yapping."

Crowdie laughed good naturedly, and Katharine said nothing. As they reached the lower landing she turned and paused an instant, so that Griggs came beside her.

"Did you always hate music?" she asked, looking up into his weather-beaten face with some curiosity.

"Hm!" Griggs uttered a doubtful sound. "It's a long time since I heard any that pleased me, at all events."

"There are certain subjects, Miss Lauderdale, upon which Griggs is unapproachable, because he won't say anything. And there are others upon which it is dangerous to approach him, because he is likely to say too much. Hester! Where are you?"

He disappeared into the little room at the front of the house in search of his wife, and Katharine stood alone with Griggs in the entry. Again she looked at him with curiosity.

"You're a very good-humoured person, Mr. Griggs," she said, with a smile.

"You mean about Crowdie? Oh, I can stand a lot of his chaff — and he has to stand mine, too."

"That was a very interesting answer you gave to my question about dreams," said Katharine, leaning against the pillar of the banister.

"Was it? Let me see — what did I say?" He seemed to be absent-minded again.

"Come to luncheon!" cried Crowdie, reappearing with Hester at that moment. "You can talk metaphysics over the oysters."

"Metaphysics!" exclaimed Griggs, with a smile.

"Oh, I know," answered Crowdie. "I can't tell the difference between metaphysics and psychics, and geography and Totem. It is all precisely the same to me — and it is to Griggs, if he'd only acknowledge it. Come along, Miss Lauderdale — to oysters and culture!"

Hester laughed at Crowdie's good spirits, and Griggs smiled. He had large, sharp teeth, and Katharine thought of the wolf and the rabbit again. It was strange that they should be on such good terms.

They sat down to luncheon. The dining-room,

like every other part of the small house, had been beautified as much as its position and dimensions would allow. It had originally been small, but an extension of glass had been built out into the yard, which Hester had turned into a fernery. There were a great number of plants of many varieties, some of which had been obtained with great difficulty from immense distances. Hester had been told that it would be impossible to make them grow in an inhabited room, but she had succeeded, and the result was something altogether out of the common.

She admitted that, besides the attention she bestowed upon the plants herself, they occupied the whole time of a specially trained gardener. They were her only hobby, and where they were concerned, time and money had no value for her. The dining-room itself was simple, but exquisite in its way. There were a few pieces of wonderfully chiselled silver on the sideboard, and the glasses on the table were Venetian and Bohemian, and very old. The linen was as fine as fine writing paper, the porcelain was plain white Sèvres. There was nothing superfluous, but there were all the little, unobtrusive, almost priceless details which are the highest expression of intimate luxury — in which the eye alone receives rest, while the other senses are flattered to the utmost. Colour and the precious metals are terribly cheap things

nowadays compared with what appeals to touch and taste. There are times when certain dainties, like terrapin, for instance, are certainly worth much more than their weight in silver, if not quite their weight in gold. But as for that, to say that a man is worth his weight in gold has ceased to mean very much. Some ingenious persons have lately calculated that the average man's weight in gold would be worth about forty thousand dollars, and that a few minutes' worth of the income of some men living would pay for a life-sized golden calf. The further development of luxury will be an interesting thing to watch during the next century. A poor woman in New York recently returned a roast turkey to a charitable lady who had sent it to her, with the remark that she was accustomed to eat roast beef at Christmas, though she 'did not mind turkey on Thanksgiving Day.'

Katharine wondered how far such a man as Griggs, who said that he hated music, could appreciate the excessive refinement of a luxury which could be felt rather than seen. It was all familiar to Katharine, and there were little things at the Crowdies which she longed to have at home. Griggs ate his oysters in silence. Fletcher came to his elbow with a decanter.

"Vin de Grave, sir?" enquired the old butler in a low voice.

"No wine, thank you," said Griggs.

"There's Sauterne, isn't there, Walter?" asked Hester. "Perhaps Mr. Griggs —"

"Griggs is a cold water man, like me," answered Crowdie. "His secret vice is to drink a bucket of it, when nobody is looking."

Fletcher looked disappointed, and replaced the decanter on the sideboard.

"It's uncommon to see two men who drink nothing," observed Hester. "But I remember that Mr. Griggs never did."

"Never — since you knew me, Mrs. Crowdie. I did when I was younger."

"Did you? What made you give it up?"

Katharine felt a strange pain in her heart, as they began to talk of the subject. The reality was suddenly coming back out of dreamland.

"I lost my taste for it," answered Griggs, indifferently.

"About the same time as when you began to hate music, wasn't it?" asked Crowdie, gravely.

"Yes, I daresay."

The elder man spoke quietly enough, and there was not a shade of interest in his voice as he answered the question. But Katharine, who was watching him unconsciously, saw a momentary change pass over his face. He glanced at Crowdie with an expression that was almost savage. The dark, weary eyes gleamed fiercely for an instant,

the great veins swelled at the lean temples, the lips parted and just showed the big, sharp teeth. Then it was all over again and the kindly look came back. Crowdie was not smiling, and the tone in which he had asked the question showed plainly enough that it was not meant as a jest. Indeed, the painter himself seemed unusually serious. But he had not been looking at Griggs, nor had Hester seen the sudden flash of what was very like half-suppressed anger. Katharine wondered more and more, and the little incident diverted her thoughts again from the suggestion which had given her pain.

"Lots of men drink water altogether, nowadays," observed Crowdie. "It's a mistake, of course, but it's much more agreeable."

"A mistake!" exclaimed Katharine, very much astonished.

"Oh, yes — it's an awful mistake," echoed Griggs, in the most natural way possible.

"I'm not so sure," said Hester Crowdie, in a tone of voice which showed plainly that the idea was not new to her.

"I don't understand," said Katharine, unable to recover from her surprise. "I always thought that —" she checked herself and looked across at the ferns, for her heart was hurting her again.

She suddenly realized, also, that considering what had happened on the previous night, it was

very tactless of Crowdie not to change the subject. But he seemed not at all inclined to drop it yet.

"Yes," he said. "In the first place, total abstinence shortens life. Statistics show that moderate consumers of alcoholic drinks live considerably longer than drunkards and total abstainers."

"Of course," assented Griggs. "A certain amount of wine makes a man lazy for a time, and that rests his nerves. We who drink water accomplish more in a given time, but we don't live so long. We wear ourselves out. If we were not the strongest generation there has been for centuries, we should all be in our graves by this time."

"Do you think we are a very strong generation?" asked Crowdie, who looked as weak as a girl.

"Yes, I do," answered Griggs. "Look at yourself and at me. You're not an athlete, and an average street boy of fifteen or sixteen might kill you in a fight. That has nothing to do with it. The amount of actual hard work, in your profession, which you've done — ever since you were a mere lad — is amazing, and you're none the worse for it, either. You go on, just as though you had begun yesterday. Heaving weights and rowing races is no test of what a man's strength will bear in everyday life. You don't need big muscles and strong joints. But you need good

nerves and enormous endurance. I consider you a very strong man — in most ways that are of any use."

"That's true," said Mrs. Crowdie. "It's what I've always been trying to put into words."

"All the same," continued Griggs, "one reason why you do more than other people is that you drink water. If we are strong, it's because the last generation and the one before it lived too well. The next generation will be ruined by the advance of science."

"The advance of science!" exclaimed Katharine. "But, Mr. Griggs — what extraordinary ideas you have!"

"Have I? It's very simple, and it's absolutely true. We've had the survival of the fittest, and now we're to have the survival of the weakest, because medical science is learning how to keep all the weaklings alive. If they were puppies, they'd all be drowned, for fear of spoiling the breed. That's rather a brutal way of putting it, but it's true. As for the question of drink, the races that produce the most effect on the world are those that consume the most meat and the most alcohol. I don't suppose any one will try to deny that. Of course, the consequences of drinking last for many generations after alcohol has gone out of use. It's pretty certain that before Mohammed's time the national vice of the Arabs was

drunkenness. So long as the effects lasted — for a good many generations — they swept everything before them. The most terrible nation is the one that has alcohol in its veins but not in its head. But when the effects wore out, the Arabs retired from the field before nations that drank — and drank hard. They had no chance."

"What a horrible view to take!" Katharine was really shocked by the man's cool statements, and most of all by the appearance of indisputable truth which he undoubtedly gave to them.

"And as for saying that drink is the principal cause of crime," he continued, quietly finishing a piece of shad on his plate, "it's the most arrant nonsense that ever was invented. The Hindus are total abstainers and always have been, so far as we know. The vast majority of them take no stimulant whatever, no tea, no coffee. They smoke a little. There are, I believe, about two hundred millions of them alive now, and their capacity for most kinds of wickedness is quite as great as ours. Any Indian official will tell you that. It's pure nonsense to lay all the blame on whiskey. There would be just as many crimes committed without it, and it would be much harder to detect them, because the criminals would keep their heads better under difficulties. Crime is in human nature, like virtue — like most things, if you know how to find them."

"That's perfectly true," said Crowdie. "I believe every word of it. And I know that if I drank a certain amount of wine I should have a better chance of long life, but I don't like the taste of it — couldn't bear it when I was a boy. I like to see men get mellow and good-natured over a bottle of claret, too. All the same, there's nothing so positively disgusting as a man who has had too much."

Hester looked at him quickly, warning him to drop the subject. But Griggs knew nothing of the circumstances, and went on discussing the matter from his original point of view.

"There's a beast somewhere, in every human being," he said, thoughtfully. "If you grant the fact that it is a beast, it's no worse to look at than other beasts. But it's quite proper to call a drunkard a beast, because almost all animals will drink anything alcoholic which hasn't a bad taste, until they're blind drunk. It's a natural instinct. Did you ever see a goat drink rum, or a Western pony drink a pint of whiskey? All animals like it. I've tried it on lots of them. It's an old sailors' trick."

"I think it's horrid!" exclaimed Hester. "Altogether, it's a most unpleasant subject. Can't we talk of something else?"

"Griggs can talk about anything except botany, my dear," said Crowdie. "Don't ask him about

ferns, unless you want an exhibition of ignorance which will startle you."

Katharine sat still in silence, though it would have been easy for her at that moment to turn the conversation into a new channel, by asking Griggs the first question which chanced to present itself. But she could not have spoken just then. She could not eat, either, though she made a pretence of using her fork. The reality had come back out of dreamland altogether this time, and would not be banished again. The long discussion about the subject which of all others was most painful to her, and the cynical indifference with which the two men had discussed it, had goaded her memory back through all the details of the last twenty-four hours. She was scarcely conscious that Hester had interfered, as she became more and more absorbed by her own suffering.

"Shall we talk of roses and green fields and angels' loves?" asked Griggs. "How many portraits have you painted since last summer, Crowdie?"

"By way of reminding me of roses you stick the thorns into me — four, I think — and two I'm doing now, besides Miss Lauderdale's. There's been a depression down town. That accounts for the small number. Portrait painters suffer first. In hard times people don't want them."

"Yes," answered Griggs, thoughtfully. "Por-

trait painters and hatters. Did you know that, Crowdie? When money is tight in Wall Street, people don't bet hats, and the hatters say it makes a great difference."

"That's queer. And you — how many books have you written?"

"Since last summer? Only one — a boshy little thing of sixty thousand."

"Sixty thousand what?" asked Hester. "Dollars?"

"Dollars!" Griggs laughed. "No — only words. Sixty thousand words. That's the way we count what we do. No — it's a tiresome little thing. I had an idea, — or thought I had, — and just when I got to the end of it I found it was trash. That's generally the way with me, unless I have a stroke of luck. Haven't you got an idea for me, Mrs. Crowdie? I'm getting old and people won't give me any, as they used to."

"I wish I had! What do you want? A love story?"

"Of course. But what I want is a character. There are no new plots, nor incidents, nor things of that sort, you know. Everything that's ever happened has happened so often. But there are new characters. The end of the century, the sharp end of the century, is digging them up out of the sands of life — as you might dig up clams with a pointed stick."

"That's bathos!" laughed Crowdie. "The sands of life — and clams!"

"I wish you'd stick to your daubs, Crowdie, and leave my English alone!" said Griggs. "It sells just as well as your portraits. No — what I mean is that just when fate is twisting the tail of the century — "

"Really, my dear fellow — that's a little too bad, you know! To compare the century to a refractory cow!"

"Crowdie," said Griggs, gravely, "in a former state I was a wolf, and you were a rabbit, and I gobbled you up. If you go on interrupting me, I'll do it again and destroy your Totem."

Katharine started suddenly and stared at Griggs. It seemed so strange that he should have used the very words — wolf and rabbit — which had been in her mind more than once during the morning.

"What is it, Miss Lauderdale?" he asked, in some surprise. "You look startled."

"Oh — nothing!" Katharine hastened to say. "I happened to have thought of wolves and rabbits, and it seemed odd that you should mention them."

"Write to the Psychical Research people," suggested Crowdie. "It's a distinct case of thought-transference."

"I daresay it is," said Griggs, indifferently. "Everything is transferable — why shouldn't thoughts be?"

"Everything?" repeated Crowdie. "Even the affections?"

"Oh, yes — even the affections — but punched, like a railway ticket," answered Griggs, promptly. Everybody laughed a little, except Griggs himself.

"Of course the affections are transferable," he continued, meditatively. "The affections are the hat — the object is only the peg on which it's hung. One peg is almost as good as another — if it's within reach; but the best place for the hat is on the man's own head. Nothing shields a man like devoting all his affections to himself."

"That's perfectly outrageous!" exclaimed Hester Crowdie. "You make one think that you don't believe in anything! Oh, it's too bad — really it is!"

"I believe in ever so many things, my dear lady," answered Griggs, looking at her with a singularly gentle expression on his weather-beaten face. "I believe in lots of good things — more than Crowdie does, as he knows. I believe in roses, and green fields, and love, as much as you do. Only — the things one believes in are not always good for one — it depends — love's path may lie among roses or among thorns; yet the path always has two ends — the one end is life, if the love is true."

"And the other?" asked Katharine, meeting his far-away glance.

"The other is death," he answered, almost solemnly.

A momentary silence followed the words. Even Crowdie made no remark, while both Hester and Katharine watched the elder man's face, as women do when a man who has known the world well speaks seriously of love.

"But then," added Griggs himself, more lightly, and as though to destroy the impression he had made, "most people never go to either end of the path. They enter at one side, look up and down it, cross it, and go out at the other. Something frightens them, or they don't like the colour of the roses, or they're afraid of the thorns — in nine cases out of ten, something drives them out of it."

"How can one be driven out of love?" asked Katharine, gravely.

"I put the thing generally, and adorned it with nice similes and things — and now you want me to explain all the details!" protested Griggs, with a little rough laugh. "How can one be driven out of love? In many ways, I fancy. By a real or imaginary fault of the other person in the path, I suppose, as much as by anything. It won't do to stand at trifles when one loves. There's a meaning in the words of the marriage service — 'for better, for worse.'"

"I know there is," said Katharine, growing

pale, and choking herself with the words in the determination to be brave.

"Of course there is. People don't know much about one another when they get married. At least, not as a rule. They've met on the stage like actors in a play — and then, suddenly, they meet in private life, and are quite different people. Very probably the woman is jealous and extravagant, and has a temper, and has been playing the ingenuous young girl's parts on the stage. And the man, who has been doing the self-sacrificing hero, who proposes to go without butter in order to support his starving mother-in-law, turns out to be a gambler — or drinks, or otherwise plays the fool. Of course that's all very distressing to the bride or the bridegroom, as the case may be. But it can't be helped. They've taken one another 'for better, for worse,' and it's turned out to be for worse. They can go to Sioux City and get a divorce, but then that's troublesome and scandalous, and one thing and another. So they just put up with it. Besides, they may love each other so much that the defects don't drive them out of it. Then the bad one drags down the good one — or, in rare cases, the good one raises the bad one. Oh, yes — I'm not a cynic — that happens, too, from time to time."

Crowdie looked at his wife with his soft, languishing glance, and if Katharine had been

watching him, she might have seen on his red lips the smile she especially detested. But she was looking down and pressing her hands together under the table. Hester Crowdie's eyes were fixed on her face, for she was very pale and was evidently suffering. Griggs also looked at her, and saw that something unusual was happening.

"Mrs. Crowdie," he said, vigorously changing the subject, as a man can who has been leading the conversation, "if it isn't a very rude question, may I ask where you get the extraordinary ham you always have whenever I lunch with you? I've been all over the world, and I've never eaten anything like it. I'm not sure whether it's the ham itself, or some secret in the cooking."

Mrs. Crowdie glanced at Katharine's face once more, and then looked at him. Crowdie also turned towards him, and Katharine slowly unclasped her hands beneath the table, as though the bitterness of death were passed.

"Oh — the ham?" repeated Mrs. Crowdie. "They're Yorkshire hams, aren't they, Walter? You always order them."

"No, my dear," answered Crowdie. "They're American. We've not had any English ones for two or three years. Fletcher gets them. He's a better judge than the cook. Griggs is quite right — there's a trick about boiling them — something to do with changing the water a certain number of

times before you put in the wine. Are you going to set up housekeeping, Griggs? I should think that oatmeal and water and dried herrings would be your sort of fare, from what I remember."

"Something of that kind," answered Griggs. "Anything's good enough that will support life."

The luncheon came to an end without any further incident, and the conversation ran on in the very smallest of small talk. Then Griggs, who was a very busy man, lighted a cigarette and took his departure. As he shook hands with Katharine, and bowed in his rather foreign way, he looked at her once more, as though she interested him very much.

"I hope I shall see you again," said Katharine, quietly.

"I hope so, indeed," answered Griggs. "You're very kind to say so."

When he was gone the other three remained together in the little front room, which has been so often mentioned.

"Will you sit for me a little longer, Miss Lauderdale?" asked Crowdie.

"Oh, don't work any more just yet, Walter!" cried Hester, with sudden anxiety.

"Why? What's the matter?" enquired Crowdie in some surprise.

"You know what Mr. Griggs was just saying at

luncheon. You work so hard! You'll overdo it some day. It's perfectly true, you know. You never give yourself any rest!"

"Except during about one-half of the year, my dear, when you and I do absolutely nothing together in the most beautiful places in the world — in the most perfect climates, and without one solitary little shadow of a care for anything on earth but our two selves."

"Yes — I know. But you work all the harder the rest of the time. Besides, we haven't been abroad this year, and you say we can't get away for at least two months. Do give yourself time to breathe — just after luncheon, too. I'm sure it's not good for him, is it Katharine?" she asked, appealing to her friend.

"Of course not!" answered Katharine. "And besides, I must run home. My dear, just fancy! I forgot to ask you to send word to say that I wasn't coming, and they won't know where I am. But we lunch later than you do — if I go directly, I shall find them still at table."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Hester. "You don't want to go really? Do you? You know, I could send word still — it wouldn't be too late." She glanced at her husband, who shook his head, and smiled — he was standing behind Katharine. "Well — if you must, then," continued Hester, "I won't keep you. But come back soon. It seems

to me that I never see you now — and I have lots of things to tell you."

Katharine shook hands with Crowdie, whose soft, white fingers felt cold in hers. Hester went out with her into the entry, and helped her to put on her thick coat.

"Take courage, dear!" said Mrs. Crowdie in a low voice, as she kissed her. "It will come right in the end."

Katharine looked fixedly at her for a few seconds, buttoning her coat.

"It's not courage that I need," she said slowly, at last. "I think I have enough — good-bye — Hester, darling — good-bye!"

She put her arms round her friend and kissed her three times, and then turned quickly and let herself out, leaving Hester standing in the entry, wondering at the solemn way in which she had taken leave of her.

CHAPTER XXVI.

KATHARINE'S mood had changed very much since she had entered the Crowdies' house. She had felt then a certain sense of strength which had been familiar to her all her life, but which had never before seemed so real and serviceable. She had been sure that she could defy the world — in that black frock she wore — and that her face would be of marble and her heart of steel under all imaginable circumstances. She had carried her head high and had walked with a firm tread. She had felt that if she met John Ralston she could tell him what she thought of him, and hurt him, so that in his suffering, at least, he should repent of what he had done.

It was different now. She did not attempt to find reasons for the difference, and they would have been hard to discover. But she knew that she had been exposed to a sort of test of her strength, and had broken down, and that Hester Crowdie had seen her defeat. Possibly it was the knowledge that Hester had seen and understood which was the most immediately painful circumstance at the present moment; but it was not the

most important one, for she was really quite as brave as she had believed herself, and what suffered most in her was not her vanity.

The conversation at table had somehow brought the whole truth more clearly before her, as the developer brings out the picture on a photographer's plate. The facts were fixed now, and she could not hide them nor turn from them at will.

Whether she were mistaken or not, the position was bad enough. As she saw it, it was intolerable. By her own act, by the exercise of her own will, and by nothing else, she had been secretly married to John Ralston. She had counted with certainty upon old Robert Lauderdale to provide her husband with some occupation immediately, feeling sure that within a few days she should be able to acknowledge the marriage and assume her position before the world as a married woman. But Robert Lauderdale had demonstrated to her that this was impossible under the conditions she required, namely, that John should support himself. He had indeed offered to make her independent, but that solution of the difficulty was not acceptable. To obtain what she and Ralston had both desired, it was necessary, and she admitted the fact, that John should work regularly in some office for a certain time. Robert Lauderdale himself could not take an idle man from a fashionable club and suddenly turn him into a partner in a

house of business or a firm of lawyers, if the idle man himself refused to accept money in any shape. Even if he had accepted it, such a proceeding would have been criticised and laughed at as a piece of plutocratic juggling. It would have made John contemptible. Therefore it was impossible that John and Katharine should have a house of their own and appear as a married couple for some time, for at least a year, and probably for a longer period. Under such circumstances to declare the marriage would have been to make themselves the laughing-stock of society, so long as John continued to live under his mother's roof, and Katharine with her father. The secret marriage would have to be kept a secret, except, perhaps, from the more discreet members of the family. Alexander Lauderdale would have to be told, and life would not be very pleasant for Katharine until she could leave the paternal dwelling. She knew that, but she would have been able to bear it, to look upon the next year or two as years of betrothal, and to give her whole heart and soul to help John in his work. It was the worst contingency which she had foreseen when she had persuaded him to take the step with her, and she had certainly not expected that it could arise; but since it had arisen, she was ready to meet it. There was nothing within the limits of reason which she would not have done for John, and she had driven those limits as far from

ordinary common sense as was possible, to rashness, even to the verge of things desperate in their folly.

She knew that. But she had counted on John Ralston with that singularly whole-hearted faith which characterizes very refined women. Many years ago, when analytical fiction was in its infancy, Charles de Bernard made the very wise and true observation that no women abandon themselves more completely in thought and deed to the men they love, or make such real slaves of themselves, as those whom he calls 'great ladies,' — that is, as we should say, women of the highest refinement, the most unassailable social position, and the most rigid traditions. The remark is a very profound one. The explanation of the fact is very simple. Women who have grown up in surroundings wherein the letter of honour is rigidly observed, and in which the spirit of virtue prevails for honour's sake, readily believe that the men they love are as honourable as they seem, and more virtuous in all ways than sinful man is likely to be. The man whom such a woman loves with all her heart, before she has met truth face to face, cannot possibly be as worthy as she imagines that he is; and if he be an honest man, he must be aware of the fact, and must constantly suffer by the ever present knowledge that he is casting a shadow greater than himself, so to say — and to

push the simile further, it is true that in attempting to overtake that shadow of himself, he often deliberately walks away from the light which makes him cast it.

John Ralston could never, under any circumstances, have done all that Katharine had expected of him, although she had professed to expect so little. Woman fills the hours of her lover's absence with scenes from her own sweet dreamland. In nine cases out of ten, when she has the chance of comparing what she has learned with what she has imagined, she has a moment of sickening disappointment. Later in life there is an adjustment, and at forty years of age she merely warns her daughter vaguely that she must not believe too much in men. That is the usual sequence of events.

But Katharine's case just now was very much worse than the common. It is not necessary to recapitulate the evidence against John's soberness on that memorable Thursday. It might have ruined the reputation of a Father of the Church. Up to one o'clock on the following day no one but Mrs. Ralston and Doctor Routh were aware that there was anything whatsoever to be said on the other side of the question. So far as Katharine or any one else could fairly judge, John had been through one of the most outrageous and complete sprees of which New York society had heard for a

long time. A certain number of people knew that he had practically fought Hamilton Bright in the hall of his club, and had undoubtedly tripped him up and thrown him. Katharine, naturally enough, supposed that every one knew it, and in spite of Bright's reassuring words on the previous night, she fully expected that John would have to withdraw from the club in question. Even she, girl as she was, knew that this was a sort of public disgrace.

There was no other word for it. The man she loved, and to whom she had been secretly married, had publicly disgraced himself on the very day of the marriage, had been tipsy in the club, had been seen drunk in the streets, had been in a fight with a professional boxer, and had been incapable of getting home alone — much more of going to meet his wife at the Assembly ball.

If he had done such things on their wedding day, what might he not do hereafter? The question was a natural one. Katharine had bound herself to a hopeless drunkard. She had heard of such cases, unfortunately, though they have become rare enough in society, and she knew what it all meant. There would be years of a wretched existence, of a perfectly hopeless attempt to cure him. She had heard her father tell such stories, for Alexander Junior was not a peaceable abstainer like Griggs and Crowdie. He was not an abstainer

at all — he was a man of ferocious moderation. She remembered painful details about the drunkard's children. Then there was a story of a blow — and then a separation — a wife who, for her child's sake, would not go to another State and be divorced — and the going back to the father's house to live, while the husband sank from bad to worse, and his acquaintances avoided him in the street, till he had been seen hanging about low liquor saloons and telling drunken loafers the story of his married life — speaking to them of the pure and suffering woman who was still his lawful wife — and laughing about it. Alexander had told it all, as a wholesome lesson to his household, which, by the way, consisted of his aged father, his wife, and his two daughters, none of whom, one might have thought, could ever stand in need of such lessons. Charlotte had laughed then, and Katharine had been disgusted. Mrs. Lauderdale's perfectly classical face had expressed nothing, for she had been thinking of something else, and the old philanthropist had made some remarks about the close connection between intemperance and idiocy. But the so-called lesson was telling heavily against John Ralston now, two or three years after it had been delivered.

It was clear to Katharine that her life was ruined before it had begun. In those first hours after the shock it did not occur to her that she could ever

forgive John. She was therefore doubly sure that the ruin he had wrought was irretrievable. She could not naturally think now of the possibility of ever acknowledging her marriage. To proclaim it meant to attempt just such a life as she had heard her father describe. Unfortunately, too, in that very case, she knew the people, and knew that Alexander Junior, who never exaggerated anything but the terrors of the life to come, had kept within the truth rather than gone beyond it.

She did not even tell herself that matters would have been still worse if she had been made publicly John Ralston's wife on the previous day. At that moment she did not seek to make things look more bearable, if they might. She had faced the situation and it was terrible — it justified anything she might choose to do. If she chose to do something desperate to free herself, she wished to be fully justified, and that desired justification would be weakened by anything which should make her position seem more easy to bear.

Indeed, she could hardly have been blamed, whatever she had done. She was bound without being united, married and yet not married, but necessarily shut off from all future thought of marriage, so long as John Ralston lived.

She had assumed duties, too, which she was far from wishing to avoid. In her girlish view, the difference beween the married and the single state

lay mainly in the loss of the individual liberty which seemed to belong to the latter. She had been brought up, as most American girls are, in old-fashioned ideas on the subject, which are good, — much better than European ideas, — though in extended practice they occasionally lead to some odd results, and are not always carried out in after life. In two words, our American idea is that, on being married, woman assumes certain responsibilities, and ceases, so to say, to be a free dancer in a ball-room. The general idea in Europe is that, at marriage, a woman gets rid of as many responsibilities as she can, and acquires the liberty to do as she pleases, which has been withheld from her before.

Katharine felt, therefore, even at that crisis, that she had forfeited her freedom, and, amidst all she felt, there was room for that bitter regret. A French girl could hardly understand her point of view; a certain number of English girls might appreciate it, and some might possibly feel as she did; to an American girl it will seem natural enough. It was not merely out of a feeling of self-respect that she looked upon a change as necessary, nor out of a blind reverence for the religious ceremony which had taken place. Every inborn and cultivated instinct and tradition told her that as a married woman, though the whole world should believe her to be a young girl, she could not behave

as she had behaved formerly; that a certain form of perfectly innocent amusement would no longer be at all innocent now; that she had forfeited the right to look upon every man she met as a possible admirer — she went no further than that in her idea of flirtation — and finally that, somehow, she should feel out of place in the parties of very young people to which she was naturally invited.

She was a married woman, and she must behave as one, for the rest of her natural life, though no one was ever to know that she was married. It was a very general idea, with her, but it was a very strong one, and none the less so for its ingenuous simplicity.

But the fact that she regretted her liberty did not even distantly suggest that she might ever fall in love with any one but John Ralston. Her only wish was to make him feel bitterly what he had done, that he might regret it as long as he lived, just as she must regret her liberty. The offence was so monstrous that the possibility of forgiving it did not cross her mind. She did not, however, ask herself whether the love that still remained was making the injury he had done it seem yet more atrocious. Love was still in a state of suspended animation — there was no telling what he might do when he came to life again. For the time being he was not to be taken into consideration at all. If she were to love him during the

coming years, that would only make matters much worse.

There is not, perhaps, in the yet comparatively passionless nature of most young girls so great a capacity for real suffering as there is in older women. But there is something else instead. There is a sensitiveness which most women lose by degrees to a certain point, though never altogether, the sensitiveness of the very young animal when it is roughly exposed to the first storm of its first winter, if it has been born under the spring breezes and reared amongst the flowers of summer.

It will suffer much more acutely later, — lash and spur, or shears and knife, sharper than wind and snow, — but it will never be so sensitive again. It will never forget how the cruel cold bit its young skin, and got into its delicate throat, and made its slender limbs tremble like the tendrils of a creeper.

It was snowing again, but Katharine walked slowly, and went out of her way in her unformulated wish to lose time, and to put off the moment at which she must meet the familiar faces and hear the well-known voices at home. Until Griggs had broached the fatal subject at table, she had been taken out of herself at the Crowdies'. She must go back to herself now, and she hated the thought as she hated all her own existence. But

the regions between Clinton Place and Fourth Avenue are not the part of New York in which it is best for a young girl to walk about alone. She did not like to be stared at by the loafers at the corners, nor to be treated with too much familiarity by the patronizing policeman who saw her over the Broadway crossing. Then, too, she remembered that she had given no notice of her absence from luncheon, and that her mother might perhaps be anxious about her. There was nothing for it but to take courage and go home. She only hoped that Charlotte might not be there.

But Charlotte had come, in the hope of enjoying herself as she had done on the previous day. Katharine ascertained the fact from the girl who let her in, and went straight to her room, sending word to her mother that she had lunched with the Crowdies and would come down presently. Even as she went up the stairs she felt a sharp pain at the thought that her mother and sister were probably at that very moment discussing John's mishaps, and comparing notes about the stories they had heard — and perhaps reading more paragraphs from the papers. The shame of the horrible publicity of it all overcame her, and she locked her door, and tried the handle to be sure that it was fast — with a woman's distrust of all mechanical contrivances when she wishes to be quite sure of a situation. It was instinctive, and she had

no second thought which she tried to hide from herself.

As she took off her hat and coat she grew very pale, and the deep shadows came under her eyes — so dark that she wondered at them vaguely as she glanced at herself in the mirror. She felt faint and sick. She drank a little water, and then, with a sudden impulse, threw herself upon her bed, and lay staring at the ceiling, as she had lain at dawn. The same glare still came in from the street and penetrated every corner, but not so vividly as before, for the snow was falling fast, and the mist of the whirling flakes softened the light.

It was a forlorn little room. Robert the Rich would have been very much surprised if he could have seen it. He was a generous man, and was very fond of his grand-niece, and if he had known exactly how she lived under her father's roof it would have been like him to have interfered. All that he ever saw of the house was very different. There was great simplicity downstairs, and his practised eye detected the signs of a rigid economy — far too rigid, he thought, when he calculated what Alexander Junior must be worth; a ridiculously exaggerated economy, he considered, when he thought of his own wealth, and that his only surviving brother lived in the house in Clinton Place. But there was nothing squalid or mean

about it all. The meanness was relative. It was like an aspersion upon the solidity of Robert's fortune, and upon his intention of providing suitably for all his relations.

Upstairs, however, and notably in Katharine's room, things had a different aspect. Nothing had been done there since long before Charlotte had been married. The wall-paper was old-fashioned, faded, and badly damaged by generations of tacks and pins. The carpet was threadbare and patched, and there were holes where even a patch had not been attempted. The furniture was in the style of fifty years ago or more, veneered with dark mahogany, but the veneering was coming off in places, leaving bare little surfaces of dusty pine wood smeared with yellowish, hardened glue. Few objects can look more desperately shabby than veneered furniture which is coming to pieces. There was nothing in the room which Katharine could distinctly remember to have seen in good condition, except the old carpet, which had been put down when she and Charlotte had been little girls. To Charlotte herself, when she had come in on Wednesday afternoon, there had been something delightful in the renewal of acquaintance with all her old dinginess of intimate surroundings. Charlotte's own life was almost oppressed with luxury, so that it destroyed her independence. But to Katharine, worn out and heartsore

with the troubles of her darkening life, it was all inexpressibly depressing. She stared at the ceiling as she lay there, in order not to look at the room itself. She was very tired, too, and she would have given anything to go to sleep.

It was not merely sleep for which she longed. It was a going out. Again the thought crossed her mind, as it had that morning, that if the whole world were a single taper, she would extinguish the flame with one short breath, and everything would be over. And now, too, in her exhaustion, came the idea that something less complete, but quite as effectual, was in her power. It had passed through her brain half an hour previously, when she had bidden Hester Crowdie good-bye — with a sort of intuitive certainty that she was never to see her friend again. She had left Hester with a vague and sudden presentiment of darkness. She had assuredly not any intention of seeking death in any definite form, but it had seemed to be close to her as she had said those few words of farewell. It came nearer still as she lay alone in her own room. It came nearer, and hovered over her, and spoke to her.

It would be the instant solution of all difficulties, the end of all troubles. The deep calm against which no storm would have power any more. On the one hand, there was life in two aspects. Either to live an existence of misery and

daily torture with the victim of a most degrading vice, a man openly disgraced, and at whom every one she respected would forever look askance. Or else to live out that other life of secret bondage, neither girl nor wife, so long as John Ralston was alive, suffering each time he was dragged lower, as she was suffering to-day, bound, tied in every way, beyond possibility of escaping. Why should she suffer less to-morrow than now? It would be the same, since all the conditions must remain unchanged. It would be the same always. Those were the two aspects of living on in the future which presented themselves. The torn carpet and the broken veneering of the furniture made them seem even more terrible. There may be a point at which the trivial has the power to push the tragic to the last extremity.

And on the other side stood death, the liberator, with his white smile and far-away eyes. The snow-glare was in his face, and he did not seem to feel it, but looked quietly into it, as though he saw something very peaceful beyond. It was a mere passing fancy that evoked the picture in the weary, restless mind, but it was pleasant to gaze at it, so long as it lasted. It was gone in a moment again, leaving, however, a new impression — that of light, rather than of darkness. She wished it would come back.

Possibly she had been almost or quite dozing,

seeing that she was so much exhausted. But she was wide awake again now. She turned upon her side with a long-drawn sigh, and stared at the hideous furniture, the ragged carpet, and the dilapidated wall-paper. It was not that they meant anything of themselves — certainly not poverty, as they might have seemed to mean to any one else. They were the result of a curious combination of contradictory characters in one family, which ultimately produced stranger results than Katharine Lauderdale's secret marriage, some of which shall be chronicled hereafter. The idea of poverty was not associated with the absence of money in Katharine's mind. She might be in need of a pair of new gloves, and she and her mother might go to the opera upstairs, because the stalls were too dear. But poverty! How could it enter under the roof of any who bore the name of Lauderdale? If, yesterday, she had begged uncle Robert to give her half a million, instead of refusing a hundred thousand, it was quite within the bounds of possibility that he might have written the cheque there and then. No. The shabby furniture in Katharine's room had nothing to do with poverty, nor with the absence of money, either. It was the fatal result of certain family peculiarities concerning which the public knew nothing, and it was there, and at that moment it had a strong effect upon Katharine's mind. It

represented the dilapidation of her life, the literal dilapidation, the tearing down of one stone after another from the crowning point she had reached yesterday to the deep foundation which was laid bare as an open tomb to-day. She dwelt on the idea now, and she stared at the forlorn objects, as she had at first avoided both.

Death has a strange fascination, sometimes, both for young and old people. Men and women in the prime and strength of life rarely fall under its influence. It is the refuge of those who, having seen little, believe that there is little to see, and of the others who, having seen all, have died of the sight, inwardly, and desire bodily death as the completion of experience. Let one, or both, be wrong or right; it matters little, since the facts are there. But the fascination aforesaid is stronger upon the young than upon the old. They have fewer ties, and less to keep them with the living. For the ascendant bond is weaker than the descendant in humanity, and the love of the child for its mother is not as her love for the child. It is right that it should be so. In spite of many proverbs, we know that what the child owes the parent is as nothing compared with the parent's debt to it. Have we all found it so easy to live that we should cast stones upon heart-broken youths and maidens who would fain give back the life thrust upon them without their consent?

Katharine clasped her hands together, as she lay on her side, and prayed fervently that she might die that day — at that very hour, if possible. It would be so very easy for God to let her die, she thought, since she was already so tired. Her heart had almost stopped beating, her hands were cold, and she felt numb, and weary, and miserable. The step was so short. She wondered whether it would hurt much if she took it herself, without waiting. There were things which made one go to sleep — without waking again. That must be very easy and quite, quite painless, she thought. She felt dizzy, and she closed her eyes again.

How good it would be! All alone, in the old room, while the snow was falling softly outside. She should not mind the snow-glare any more then. It would not tire her eyes. That white smile — it came back to her at last, and she felt it on her own face. It was very strange that she should be smiling now — for she was so near crying — nearer than she thought, indeed, for as the delicate lips parted with the slow, sighing breath, the heavy lids — darkened as though they had been hurt — were softly swelling a little, and then very suddenly and quickly two great tears gathered and dropped and ran and lost themselves upon the pillow.

Ah, how peaceful it would be — never to wake again, when the little step was passed! Perhaps,

if she lay quite still, it would come. She had heard strange stories of people in the East, who let themselves die when they were weary. Surely, none of them had ever been as weary as she. Strange — she was always so strong! Every one used to say, 'as strong as Katharine Lauderdale.' If they could see her now!

She wanted to open her eyes, but the snow-glare must be still in the room, and she could not bear it — and the shabby furniture. She would breathe more slowly. It seemed as though with each quiet sigh the lingering life might float away into that dear, peaceful beyond — where there would be no snow-glare and the furniture would not be shabby — if there were any furniture at all — beyond — or any John Ralston — no 'marriage nor giving in marriage' — all alone in the old room —

Two more tears gathered, more slowly this time, though they dropped and lost themselves just where the first had fallen, and then, somehow, it all stopped, for what seemed like one blessed instant, and then there came a loud knocking, with a strange, involved dream of carpenters and boxes and a journey and being late for something, and more knocking, and her mother's voice calling to her through the door.

"Katharine, child! Wake up! Don't forget that you're to dine at the Van De Waters' at eight! It's half past six now!"

It was quite dark, save for the flickering light thrown upon the ceiling from the gas-lamp below. Katharine started up from her long sleep, hardly realizing where she was.

"All right, mother — I'm awake!" she answered sleepily.

As she listened to her mother's departing footsteps, it all came back to her, and she felt faint again. She struggled to her feet in the gloom and groped about till she had found a match, and lit the gas and drew down the old brown shades of the window. The light hurt her eyes for a moment, and as she pressed her hands to them she felt that they were wet.

"I suppose I've been crying in my sleep!" she exclaimed aloud. "What a baby I am!"

She looked at herself in the mirror with some curiosity, before beginning to dress.

"I'm an object for men and angels to stare at!" she said, and tried to laugh at her dejected appearance. "However," she added, "I suppose I must go. I'm Katharine Lauderdale — 'that nice girl who never has headaches and things' — so I have no excuse."

She stopped for a moment, still looking at herself.

"But I'm not Katharine Lauderdale!" she said presently, whispering the words to herself. "I'm Katharine Ralston — if not, what am I? Ah, dear

me!" she sighed. "I wonder how it will all end!"

At all events, Katharine Lauderdale, or Katharine Ralston, she was herself again, as she turned from the mirror and began to think of what she must wear at the Van De Waters' dinner-party.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Even John Ralston's tough constitution could not have been expected to shake off in a few hours the fatigue and soreness of such an experience as he had undergone. Even if he had been perfectly well, he would have stayed at home that day in the expectation of receiving an answer from Katharine; and as it was, he needed as much rest as he could get. He had not often been at the trouble of taking care of himself, and the sensation was not altogether disagreeable, as he sat by his own fireside, in the small room which went by the name of 'Mr. Ralston's study.' He stretched out his feet to the fire, drank a little tea from time to time, stared at the logs, smoked, turned over the pages of a magazine without reading half a dozen sentences, and revolved the possibilities of his life without coming to any conclusion.

He was stiff and bruised. When he moved his head, it ached, and when he tried to lean to the right, his neck hurt him on the left side. But if he did not move at all, he felt no pain. There was a sort of perpetual drowsy hum in his ears, partly attributable, he thought, to the singing of

a damp log in the fire, and partly to his own imagination. When he tried to think of anything but his own rather complicated affairs, he almost fell asleep. But when his attention was fixed on his present situation, it seemed to him that his life had all at once come to a standstill just as events had been moving most quickly. As for really sleeping in the intervals of thought, his constant anxiety for Katharine's reply to his letter kept his faculties awake. He knew, however, that it would be quite unreasonable to expect anything from her before twelve o'clock. He tried to be patient.

Between ten and eleven, when he had been sitting before his fire for about an hour, the door opened softly and Mrs. Ralston entered the room. She did not speak, but as John rose to meet her she smiled quietly and made him sit down again. Then she kneeled before the hearth and began to arrange the fire, an operation which she had always liked, and in which she displayed a singular talent. Moreover, at more than one critical moment in her life, she had found it a very good resource in embarrassment. A woman on her knees, making up a fire, has a distinct advantage. She may take as long as she pleases about it, for any amount of worrying about the position of a particular log is admissible. She may change colour twenty times in a minute, and the heat of

the flame as well as the effort she makes in moving the wood will account satisfactorily for her blushes or her pallor. She may interrupt herself in speaking, and make effective pauses, which will be attributed to the concentration of her thoughts upon the occupation of her hands. If a man comes too near, she may tell him sharply to keep away, either saying that she can manage what she is doing far better if he leaves her alone, or alleging that the proximity of a second person will keep the air from the chimney and make it smoke. Or if the gods be favourable and she willing, she may at any moment make him kneel beside her and help her to lift a particularly heavy log. And when two young people are kneeling side by side before a pile of roaring logs in winter, the flames have a strange bright magic of their own; and sometimes love that has smouldered long blazes up suddenly and takes the two hearts with it — out of sheer sympathy for the burning oak and hickory and pine.

But Mrs. Ralston really enjoyed making up a fire, and she went to the hearth quite naturally and without reflecting that after what had occurred she felt a little timid in her son's presence. He obeyed her and resumed his seat, and sat leaning forward, his arms resting on his knees and his hands hanging down idly, while he watched his mother's skilful hands at work.

"Jack dear—" she paused in her occupation, having the tongs in one hand and a little piece of kindling-wood in the other, but did not turn round —"Jack, I can't make up to you for what I did last night, can I?"

She was motionless for a moment, listening for his reply. It came quietly enough after a second or two.

"No, mother, you can't. But I don't want to remember it, any more than you do."

Mrs. Ralston did not move for an instant after he had spoken. Then she occupied herself with the fire again.

"You're quite right," she said presently. "You wouldn't be my son, if you said anything else. If I were a man, one of us would be dead by this time."

She spoke rather intensely, so to say, but she used her hands as gently as ever in what she was doing. John said nothing.

"Men don't forgive that sort of thing from men," she continued presently. "There's no reason why a woman should be forgiven, I suppose, even if the man she has insulted is her own son."

"No," John answered thoughtfully. "There is no more reason for forgiving it. But there's every reason to forget it, if you can."

"If you can. I don't wish to forget it."

"You should, mother. Of course, you brought me up to believe — you and my father — that to doubt a man's word is an unpardonable offence, because lying is a part of being afraid, which is the only unpardonable sin. I believe it. I can't help it."

"I don't expect you to. We've always — in a way — been more like two men, you and I, than like a mother and her son. I don't want the allowances that are made for women. I despise them. I've done you wrong, and I'll take the consequences. What are they? It's a bad business, Jack. I've run against a rock. I'll do anything you ask. I'll give you half my income, and we can live apart. Will you do that?"

"Mother!" John Ralston fairly started in his surprise. "Don't talk like that!"

"There!" exclaimed Mrs. Ralston, hanging up the hearthbrush on her left, after sweeping the feathery ashes from the shining tiles within the fender. "It will burn now. Nobody understands making a fire as I do."

She rose to her feet swiftly, drew back from John, and sat down in the other of the two easy chairs which stood before the fireplace. She glanced at John and then looked at the fire she had made, clasping her hands over one knee.

"Smoke, won't you?" she said presently. "It seems more natural."

"All right — if you like."

John lit a cigarette and blew two or three puffs into the air, high above his head, very thoughtfully.

"I'm waiting for your answer, Jack," said Mrs. Ralston, at last.

"I don't see what I'm to say," replied John. "Why do you talk about it?"

"For this reason — or for these reasons," said Mrs. Ralston, promptly, as though she had prepared a speech beforehand, which was, in a measure, the truth. "I've done you a mortal injury, Jack. I know that sounds dramatic, but it's not. I'll tell you why. If any one else, man or woman, had deliberately doubted your statement on your word of honour, you would never have spoken to him or her again. Of course, in our country, duelling isn't fashionable — but if it had been a man — I don't know, but I think you would have done something to him with your hands. Yes, you can't deny it. Well, the case isn't any better because satisfaction is impossible, is it? I'm trying to look at it logically, because I know what you must feel. Don't you see, dear?"

"Yes. But —"

"No! Let me say all I've got to say first, and then you can answer me. I've been thinking about it all night, and I know just what I ought to do. I know very well, too, that most women

would just make you forgive as much as you could and then pretend to you and to themselves that nothing had ever happened. But we're not like that, you and I. We're like two men, and since we've begun in that way, it's not possible to turn round and be different now, in the face of a difficulty. There are people who would think me foolish, and call me quixotic, and say, 'But it's your own son — what a fuss you're making about nothing.' Wouldn't they? I know they would. It seems to me that, if anything, it's much worse to insult one's own son, as I did you, than somebody else's son, to whom one owes nothing. I'm not going to put on sackcloth and sit in the ashes and cry. That wouldn't help me a bit, nor you either. Besides, other people, as a rule, couldn't understand the thing. You never told me a lie in your life. Last Monday when you came home after that accident, and weren't quite yourself, you told me the exact truth about everything that had happened. You never even tried to deceive me. Of course you have your life, and I have mine. I have always respected your secrets, haven't I, Jack?"

"Indeed you have, mother."

"I know I have, and if I take credit for it, that only makes all this worse. I've never asked you questions which I thought you wouldn't care to answer. I've never been inquisitive about all this

affair with Katharine. I don't even know at the present moment whether you're engaged to her still, or not. I don't want to know — but I hope you'll marry her some day, for I'm very fond of her. No — I've never interfered with your liberty, and I've never been willing to listen to what people wished to tell me about you. I shouldn't think it honest. And in that way we've lived very harmoniously, haven't we?"

"Mother, you know we have," answered John, earnestly.

"All that makes this very much worse. One drop of blood will turn a whole bowl of clean water red. It wouldn't show at all if the water were muddy. If you and I lived together all our lives, we should never forget last night."

"We could try to," said John. "I'm willing."

Mrs. Ralston paused and looked at him a full minute in silence. Then she put out her hand and touched his arm.

"Thank you, Jack," she said gravely.

John tried to press her hand, but she withdrew it.

"But I'm not willing," she resumed, after another short pause. "I've told you — I don't want a woman's privilege to act like a brute and be treated like a spoiled child afterwards. Besides, there are many other things. If what I thought had been true, I should never have allowed myself

to act as I did. I ought to have been kind to you, even if you had been perfectly helpless. I know you're wild, and drink too much sometimes. You have the strength to stop it if you choose, and you've been trying to since Monday. You've said nothing, and I've not watched you, but I've been conscious of it. But it's not your fault if you have the tendency to it. Your father drank very hard sometimes, but he had a different constitution. It shortened his life, but it never seemed to affect him outwardly. I'm conscious — to my shame — that I didn't discourage him, and that when I was young and foolish I was proud of him because he could take more than all the other officers and never show it. Men drank more in those days. It was not so long after the war. But you're a nervous man, and your father wasn't, and you have his taste for it without that sort of quiet, phlegmatic, strong, sailor's nature that he had. So it's not your fault. Perhaps I should have frightened you about it when you were a boy. I don't know. I've made mistakes in my life."

"Not many, mother dear."

"Well — I've made a great one now, at all events. I'm not going back over anything I've said already. It's the future I'm thinking of. I can't do much, but I can manage a 'modus vivendi' for us — "

"But why —"

"Don't interrupt me, dear! I've made up my mind what to do. All I want of you now, is your advice as a man, about the way of doing it. Listen to me, Jack. After what has happened between us — no matter how it turns out afterwards, for we can't foresee that — it's impossible that we should go on living as we've lived since your father died. I don't mean that we must part, unless you want to leave me, as you would have a perfect right to do."

"Mother!"

"Jack — if I were your brother, instead of your mother — still more, if I were any other relation — would you be willing to depend for the rest of your life on him, or on any one who had treated you as I treated you last night?"

She paused for an answer, but John Ralston was silent. With his character, he knew that she was quite right, and that nothing in the world could have induced him to accept such a situation.

"Answer me, please, dear," she said, and waited again.

"Mother — you know! Why should I say it?"

"You would refuse to be dependent any longer on such a person?"

"Well — yes — since you insist upon my saying it," answered John, reluctantly. "But with you, it's —"

"With me, it's just the same — more so. I have had a longer experience of you than any one else could have had, and you've never deceived me. Consequently, it was more unpárdonable to doubt you. I don't wish you to be dependent on me any longer, Jack. It's an undignified position for you, after this."

"Mother — I've tried — "

"Hush, dear! I'm not talking about that. If there had been any necessity, if you had ever had reason to suppose that it wasn't my greatest happiness to have you with me — or that there wasn't quite enough for us both — you'd have just gone to sea before the mast, or done something of the same kind, as all brave boys do who feel that they're a burden on their mothers. But there's always been enough for us both, and there is now. I mean to give you your share, and keep what I need myself. That will be yours some day, too, when I'm dead and gone."

"Please don't speak of that," said John, quickly and earnestly. "And as for this idea of your — "

"Oh, I'm in no danger of dying young," interrupted Mrs. Ralston, with a little dry laugh. "I'm very strong. All the Lauderdales are, you know — we live forever. My father would have been seventy-one this year if he hadn't been killed. And as long as I live, of course, I must have something to live on. I don't mean to go begging

to uncle Robert for myself, and I shouldn't care to do it for you, though I would if it were necessary. Now, we've got just twelve thousand dollars a year between us, and the house, which is mine, you know. That will give us each six thousand dollars a year. I shall see my lawyer this morning and it can be settled at once. Whenever the house is let, if we're both abroad, you shall have half of the rent. When we're both here, half of it is yours to live in — or pull down, if you like. If you marry, you can bring your wife here, and I'll go away. Now, I think that's fair. If it isn't, say so before it's too late."

"I won't listen to anything of the kind," answered John, calmly.

"You must," answered his mother.

"I don't think so, mother."

"I do. You can't prevent me from making over half the estate to you, if I choose, and when that's done, it's yours. If you don't like to draw the rents, you needn't. The money will accumulate, for I won't touch it. You shall not be in this position of dependence on me — and at your age — after what has happened."

"It seems to me, mother dear, that it's very much the same, whether you give me a part of your income, or whether you make over to me the capital it represents. It's the same transaction in another shape, that's all."

"No, it's not, Jack! I've thought of that, because I knew you'd say it. It's so like you. It's not at all the same. You might as well say that it was originally intended that you should never have the money at all, even after I died. It was and is mine, for me and my children. As I have only one child, it's yours and mine jointly. As long as you were a boy, it was my business to look after your share of it for you. As soon as you were a man, I should have given you your share of it. It would have been much better, though there was no provision in either of the wills. If it had been a fortune, I should have done it anyhow, but as it was only enough for us two to live on, I kept it together and was as careful of it as I could be."

"Mother — I don't want you to do this," said John. "I don't like this sordid financial way of looking at it — I tell you so quite frankly."

Mrs. Ralston was silent for a few moments, and seemed to be thinking the matter over.

"I don't like it either, Jack," she said at last. "It isn't like us. So I won't say anything more about it. I'll just go and do it, and then it will be off my mind."

"Please don't!" cried Ralston, bending forward, for she made as though she would rise from her seat.

"I must," she answered. "It's the only possible basis of any future existence for us. You shall

live with me from choice, if you like. It will — well, never mind — my happiness is not the question! But you shall not live with me as a matter of necessity in a position of dependence. The money is just as much yours as it's mine. You shall have your share, and — "

"I'd rather go to sea — as you said," interrupted John.

"And let your income accumulate. Very well. But I — I hope you won't, dear. It would be lonely. It wouldn't make any difference so far as this is concerned. I should do it, whatever you did. As long as you like, live here, and pay your half of the expenses. I shall get on very well on my share if I'm all alone. Now I'm going, because there's nothing more to be said."

Mrs. Ralston rose this time. John got up and stood beside her, and they both looked at the fire thoughtfully.

"Mother — please — I entreat you not to do this thing!" said John, suddenly. "I'm a brute even to have thought twice of that silly affair last night — and to have said what I said just now, that I couldn't exactly feel as though anything could undo what had been done. Indeed — if there's anything to forgive, it's forgiven with all my heart, and we'll forget it and live just as we always have. We can, if we choose. How could you help it — the way I looked! I saw myself in the glass.

Upon my word, if I'd drunk ever so little, I should have been quite ready to believe that I was tipsy, from my own appearance — it was natural, I'm sure, and —"

"Hush, Jack!" exclaimed Mrs. Ralston. "I don't want you to find excuses for me. I was blind with anger, if that's an excuse — but it's not. And most of all — I don't want you to imagine for one moment that I'm going to make this settlement of our affairs with the least idea that it is a reparation to you, or anything at all of that sort. Not that you'd ever misunderstand me to that extent. Would you?"

"No. Certainly not. You're too much like me."

"Yes. There's no reparation about it, because that's more possible. As it is, no particular result will follow unless you wish it. You'll be free to go away, if you please, that's all. And if you choose to marry Katharine, and if she is willing to marry you on six thousand a year, you'll feel that you can, though it's not much. And for the matter of that, Jack dear — you know, don't you? If it would make you happy, and if she would — I don't think I should be any worse than most mothers-in-law — and all I have is yours, Jack, besides your share. But those are your secrets — no, it's quite natural."

John had taken her hand gently and kissed it.

"I don't want any gratitude for that," she con-

tinued. "It's perfectly natural. Besides, there's no question of gratitude between you and me. It's always been share and share alike — of everything that was good. Now I'm going. You'll be in for luncheon? Do take care of yourself to-day. See what weather we're having! And — well — it's not for me to lecture you about your health, dear. But what Doctor Routh said is true. You've grown thinner again, Jack — you grow thinner every year, though you are so strong."

"Don't worry about me, mother dear. I'm all right. And I shan't go out to-day. But I have a dinner-party this evening, and I shall go to it. I think I told you — the Van De Waters' — didn't I? Yes. I shall go to that and show myself. I'm sure people have been talking about me, and it was probably in the papers this morning. Wasn't it?"

"Dear — to tell you the truth, I wouldn't look to see. It wasn't very brave of me — but — you understand."

"I certainly shan't look for the report of my encounter with the prize-fighter. I'm sure he was one. I shall probably be stared at to-night, and some of them will be rather cold. But I'll face it out — since I'm in the right for once."

"Yes. I wouldn't have you stay at home. People would say you were afraid and were waiting for it to blow over. Is it a big dinner?"

"I don't know. I got the invitation a week ago, at least, so it isn't an informal affair. It's probably to announce Ruth Van De Water's engagement to that foreigner — you know — I've forgotten his name. I know Bright's going — because they said he wanted to marry her last year — it isn't true. And there'll probably be some of the Thirlwalls, and the young Trehearns, and Vanbrugh and his wife — you know, all the Van De Water young set. Katharine's going, too. She told me when she got the invitation, some time last week. There'll be sixteen or eighteen at table, and I suppose they'll amuse themselves somehow or other afterwards. Nobody wants to dance to-night, I fancy — at least none of our set, after the Thirlwalls', and the Assembly, and I don't know how many others last week."

"They'll probably put you next to Katharine," said Mrs. Ralston.

"Probably — especially there, for they always do — with Frank Miner on her other side to relieve my gloom. Second cousins don't count as relations at a dinner-party, and can be put together. Half of the others are own cousins, too."

"Well, if it's a big dinner it won't be so disagreeable for you. But if you'd take my advice, Jack — however — " She stopped.

"What is it, mother?" he asked. "Say it."

"Well — I was going to say that if any one made

any disagreeable remarks, or asked you why you weren't at the Assembly last night, I should just tell the whole story as it happened. And you can end by saying that I was anxious about you and sent for Doctor Routh, and refer them to him. That ought to silence everybody."

"Yes." John paused a moment. "Yes," he repeated. "I think you're right. I wish old Routh were going to be there himself."

"He'd go in a minute if he were asked," said Mrs. Ralston.

"Would he? With all those young people?"

"Of course he would — only too delighted! Dear old man, it's just the sort of thing he'd like. But I'm going, Jack, or I shall stay here chattering with you all the morning."

"That other thing, mother — about the money — don't do it!" Jack held her a moment by the hand.

"Don't try to hinder me, dear," she answered. "It's the only thing I can do — to please my own conscience a little. Good-bye. I'll see you at luncheon."

She left the room quickly, and John found himself alone with his own thoughts again.

"It's just like her," he said to himself, as he lighted a cigar and sat down to think over the situation. "She's just like a man about those things."

He had perhaps never admired and loved his

mother as he did then; not for what she was going to do, but for the spirit in which she was doing it. He was honest in trying to hinder her, because he vaguely feared that the step might cause her some inconvenience hereafter — he did not exactly know how, and he was firmly resolved that he would not under any circumstances take advantage of the arrangement to change his mode of life. Everything was to go on just as before. As a matter of theory, he was to have a fixed, settled income of his own; but as a matter of fact, he would not regard it as his. What he liked about it, and what really appealed to him in it all, was his mother's man-like respect for his honour, and her frank admission that nothing she could do could possibly wipe out the slight she had put upon him. Then, too, the fact and the theory were at variance and in direct opposition to one another. As a matter of theory, nothing could ever give him back the sensation he had always felt since he had been a boy — that his mother would believe him on his word in the face of any evidence whatsoever which there might be against him. But as a matter of fact, the evil was not only completely undone, but there was a stronger bond between them than there had ever been before.

That certainly was the first good thing which had come to him during the last four and twenty hours, and it had an effect upon his spirits.

He thought over what his mother had said about the evening, too, and was convinced that she was right in advising him to tell the story frankly as it had happened. But he was conscious all the time that his anxiety about Katharine's silence was increasing. He had roused himself at dawn, in spite of his fatigue, and had sent a servant out to post the letter with the special delivery stamp on it. Katharine must have received it long ago, and her answer might have been in his hands before now. Nevertheless, he told himself that he should not be impatient, that she had doubtless slept late after the ball, and that she would send him an answer as soon as she could. By no process of reasoning or exaggeration of doubting could he have reached the conclusion that she had never received his letter. She had always got everything he sent her, and there had never been any difficulty about their correspondence in all the years during which they had exchanged little notes. He took up the magazine again, and turned over the pages idly. Suddenly Frank Miner's name caught his eye. The little man had really got a story into one of the great magazines, a genuine novel, it seemed, for this was only a part, and there were the little words at the end of it, in italics and in parenthesis, 'to be continued,' which promised at least two more numbers, for as John reflected, when the succeeding number was to be the last,

the words were 'to be concluded.' He was glad, for Miner's sake, of this first sign of something like success, and began to read the story with interest.

It began well, in a dashing, amusing style, as fresh as Miner's conversation, but with more in it, and John was beginning to congratulate himself upon having found something to distract his attention from his bodily ills and his mental embarrassments, when the door opened, and Miner himself appeared.

"May I come in, Ralston?" he enquired, speaking softly, as though he believed that his friend had a headache.

"Oh — hello, Frank! Is that you? Come in! I'm reading your novel. I'd just found it."

Little Frank Miner beamed with pleasure as he saw that the magazine was really open at his own story, for he recognized that this, at least, could not be a case of premeditated appreciation.

"Why — Jack —" he stammered a moment later, in evident surprise. "You don't look badly at all!"

"Did they say I was dead?" enquired Ralston, with a grim smile. "Take a cigar. Sit down. Tell me all about my funeral."

Miner laughed as he carefully cut off the end of the cigar and lit it — a sort of continuous little gurgling laugh, like the purling of a brook.

"My dear boy," he said, blowing out a quantity

of smoke, and curling himself up in the easy chair. "you're the special edition of the day. The papers are full of you — they're selling like hot cakes everywhere — your fight with Tom Shelton, the champion light weight — and your turning up in the arms of two policemen — talk of a 'jag!' Lord!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

John looked at Miner quietly for a few seconds, without saying anything. The little man was evidently lost in admiration of the magnitude of his friend's 'jag,' as he called it.

"I say, Frank," said Ralston, at last, "it's all a mistake, you know. It was a series of accidents from beginning to end."

"Oh — yes — I suppose so. You managed to accumulate quite a number of accidents, as you say."

Ralston was silent again. He was well aware of the weight of the evidence against him, and he wished to enter upon his explanation by degrees, in order that it might be quite clear to Miner.

"Look here," he began, after a while. "I'm not the sort of man who tries to wriggle out of things, when he's done them, am I? Heaven knows — I've been in scrapes enough! But you never knew me to deny it, nor to try and make out that I was steady when I wasn't. Did you, Frank?"

"No," answered Miner, thoughtfully. "I never did. That's a fact. It's quite true."

The threefold assent seemed to satisfy Ralston.

"All right," he said. "Now I want you to listen to me, because this is rather an extraordinary tale. I'll tell it all, as nearly as I can, but there are one or two gaps, and there's a matter connected with it about which I don't want to talk to you."

"Go ahead," answered Miner. "I've got some perfectly new faith out — and I'm just waiting for you. Produce the mountain, and I'll take its measure and remove it at a valuation."

Ralston laughed a little and then began to tell his story. It was, of course, easy for him to omit all mention of Katharine, and he spoke of his interview with Robert Lauderdale as having taken place in connection with an idea he had of trying to get something to do in the West, which was quite true. He omitted also to mention the old gentleman's amazing manifestation of eccentricity — or folly — in writing the cheque which John had destroyed. For the rest, he gave Miner every detail as well as he could remember it. Miner listened thoughtfully and never interrupted him once.

"This isn't a joke, is it, Jack?" he asked, when John had finished with a description of Doctor Routh's midnight visit.

"No," answered Ralston, emphatically. "It's the truth. I should be glad if you would tell any one who cares to know."

"They wouldn't believe me," answered Miner, quietly.

"I say, Frank —" John's quick temper was stirred already, but he checked himself.

"It's all right, Jack," answered Miner. "I believe every word you've told me, because I know you don't invent — except about leaving cards on stray acquaintances at the Imperial, when you happen to be thirsty."

He laughed good-naturedly.

"That's another of your mistakes," said Ralston. "I know — you mean last Monday. I did leave cards at the hotel. I also had a cocktail. I didn't say I wasn't going to, and I wasn't obliged to say so, was I? It wasn't your business, my dear boy, nor Ham Bright's, either."

"Well — I'm glad you did, then. I'm glad the cards were real, though it struck me as thin at the time. I apologize, and eat humble pie. You know you're one of my illusions, Jack. There are two or three to which I cling. You're a truthful beggar, somehow. You ought to have a little hatchet, like George Washington — but I daresay you'd rather have a little cocktail. It illustrates your nature just as well. Bury the hatchet and pour the cocktail over it as a libation — where was I? Oh — this is what I meant, Jack. Other people won't believe the story, if I tell it, you know."

"Well — but there's old Routh, after all. People will believe him."

"Yes — if he takes the trouble to write a letter to the papers, over his name, degrees and qualifications. Of course they'll believe him. And the editors will do something handsome. They won't apologize, but they'll say that a zebra got loose in the office and upset the type while they were in Albany attending to the affairs of the Empire State — and that's just the same as an apology, you know, which is all you care for. You can't storm Park Row with the gallant Four Hundred at your back. In the first place, Park Row's insured, and secondly, the Four Hundred would see you — further — before they'd lift one of their four thousand fingers to help you out of a scrape which doesn't concern them. You'd have to be a parson or a pianist, before they'd do anything for you. It's 'meat, drink and pantaloons' to be one of them, anyhow — and you needn't expect anything more."

"Where do you get your similes from, Frank!" laughed Ralston.

"I don't know. But they're good ones, anyway. Why don't you get Routh to write a letter, before the thing cools down? It could be in the evening edition, you know. There have been horrid things this morning — allusions — that sort of thing."

"Allusions to what?" asked Ralston, quickly and sharply.

"To you, of course — what did you suppose?"

"Oh — to me! As though I cared! All the same, if old Routh would write, it would be a good thing. I wish he were going to be at the Van De Waters' dinner to-night."

"Why? Are you going there? So am I."

"It seems to be a sort of family tea-party," said Ralston. "Bright's going, and cousin Katharine, and you and I. It only needs the Crowdies and a few others to make it complete."

"Well — you see, they're cousins of mine, and so are you, and that sort of makes us all cousins," observed Miner, absently. "I say, Jack — tell the story at table, just as you've told it to me. Will you? I'll set you on by asking you questions. Stunning effect — especially if we can get Routh to write the letter. I'll cut it out of a paper and bring it with me."

"You know him, don't you?" asked Ralston.

"Know him? I should think so. Ever since I was a baby. Why?"

"I wish you'd go to him this morning, Frank, and get him to write the letter. Then you could take it to one of the evening papers and get them to put it in. You know all those men in Park Row, don't you?"

"Much better than some of them want to know

me," sighed the little man. "However," he added, his bright smile coming back at once, "I ought not to complain. I'm getting on, now. Let me see. You want me to go to Routh and get him to write a formal letter over his name, denying all the statements made about you this morning. Isn't that taking too much notice of the thing, after all, Jack?"

"It's going to make a good deal of difference to me in the end," answered Ralston. "It's worth taking some trouble for."

"I'm quite willing," said Miner. "But — I say! What an extraordinary story it is!"

"Oh, no. It's only real life. I told you — I only had one accident, which was quite an accident — when I tumbled down in that dark street. Everything else happened just as naturally as unnatural things always do. As for upsetting Ham Bright at the club, I was awfully sorry about that. It seemed such a low thing to do. But then — just remember that I'd been making a point of drinking nothing for several days, just by way of an experiment, and it was irritating, to say the least of it, to be grabbed by the arm and told that I was screwed. Wasn't it, Frank? And just at that moment, uncle Robert had telephoned for me to come up, and I was in a tremendous hurry. Just look at in that way, and you'll understand why I did it. It doesn't excuse it —

I shall tell Ham that I'm sorry — but it explains it. Doesn't it?"

"Rather!" exclaimed Miner, heartily.

"By the bye," said Ralston, "I wanted to ask you something. Did that fellow Crowdie hold his tongue? I suppose he was at the Assembly last night."

"Well — since you ask me —" Miner hesitated. "No — he didn't. Bright gave it to him, though, for telling cousin Emma."

"Brute! How I hate that man! So he told cousin Emma, did he? And the rest of the family, too, I suppose."

"I suppose so," answered Miner, knowing that Ralston meant Katharine. "Everybody knew about the row at the club, before the evening was half over. Teddy Van De Water said he supposed you'd back out of the dinner to-night and keep quiet till this blew over. I told Teddy that perhaps he'd better come round and suggest that to you himself this morning, if he wanted to understand things quickly. He grinned — you know how he grins — like an organ pipe in a white tie. But he said he'd heard Bright leathering into Crowdie — that's one of Teddy's expressions — so he supposed that things weren't as bad as people said — and that Crowdie was only a 'painter chap,' anyhow. I didn't know what that meant, but feebly pointed out that Crowdie was a

great man, and that his wife was a sort of cousin of mine, and that she, at least, had a good chance of having some of cousin Robert's money one of these days. Not that I wanted to defend Crowdie, or that I don't like Teddy much better — but then, you know what I mean! He'll be calling me 'one of those literary chaps,' next, with just the same air. One's bound to stand up for art and literature when one's a professional, you know, Jack. Wasn't I right?"

"Oh, perfectly!" answered Ralston, with a smile. "But will you do that for me, Frank?"

"Of course I will. You're one of my illusions, as I told you. I'm willing to do lots of things for my illusions. I'll go now, and then I'll come back and tell you what the old chap says. If by any chance he gets into a rage, I'll tell him that I didn't come so much to talk about you as to consult him about certain symptoms of nervous prostration I'm beginning to feel. He's death on nervous prostration — he's a perfect terror at it — he'll hypnotise me, and put me into a jar of spirits, and paint my nose with nervine and pickled electricity and things, and sort of wake me up generally."

"All right — if you can stand it, I can," said Ralston. "I'd go myself — only — "

"You're pretty badly used up," interrupted Miner, completing the sentence in his own way.

"I know. I remember trying to play football once. Those little games aren't much in my line. Nature meant me for higher things. I tried football, though, and then I said, like Napoleon — you remember? — 'Ces balles ne sont pas pour moi.' I couldn't tell where I began and the football ended — I felt that I was a safe under-study for a shuttlecock afterwards. That's just the way you feel, isn't it? As though it were Sunday, and you were the frog — and the boys had gone back to afternoon church? I know! Well — I'll come back as soon as I've seen Routh. Good-bye, old man — don't smoke too much. I do — but that's no reason."

The little man nodded cheerfully, knocked the ashes carefully from the end of his cigar — he was neat in everything he did — and returned it to his lips as he left the room. Ralston leaned back in his arm-chair again and rested his feet on the fender. The fire his mother had made so carefully was burning in broad, smoking flames. He felt cold and underfed and weary, so that the warmth was very pleasant; and with all that came to his heart now, as he thought of his mother, there mingled also a little simple, childlike gratitude to her for having made up such a good fire.

The time passed, and still no word came from Katharine. He was willing to find reasons or, at least, excuses, for her silence, but he was con

scious that they were of little value. He knew, now, that there had really been paragraphs in the papers about him, as he had expected, and that they had been of a very disagreeable nature. Katharine had probably seen them, or one of them, besides having heard the stories that had been circulated by Crowdie and others during the previous evening. He fancied that he could feel her unbelief, hurting him from a distance, as it were. Her face, cold and contemptuous, rose before him out of the fire, and he took up the magazine again, and tried to hide it. But it could not be hidden.

Surely by this time she must have got his letter. There could be no reasonable doubt of that. He looked at his watch again, as he had done once in every quarter of an hour for some time. It was twelve o'clock. Miner had not stayed long.

John went over the scene on Wednesday evening, at the Thirlwalls'. Katharine had been very sure of herself, at the last — sure that, whatever he did, she should always stand by him. Events had put her to the test soon enough, and this was the result. They had been married twenty-four hours, and she would not even answer his note, because appearances were against him.

And the great, strong sense of real innocence rose in him and defied and despised the woman

who could not trust him even a little. If the very least of the accusations had been true, he would have humbled himself honestly and said that she was right, and that she had promised too much, in saying all she had said. At all times he was a man ready to take the full blame of all he had done, to make himself out worse than he really was, to assume at once that he was a failure and could do nothing right. On the slightest ground, he was ready to admit everything that people brought against him. Katharine, if he had even been living as usual, would have been at liberty to reproach him as bitterly as she pleased with his weakness, to turn her back on him and condemn him unheard, if she chose. He would have been patient and would have admitted that he deserved it all, and more also. He was melancholy, he was discouraged with himself, and he was neither vain nor untruthful.

But he had made an effort, and a great one. There was in him something of the ascetic, with all his faults, and something of the enthusiasm which is capable of sudden and great self-denial if once roused. He knew what he had done, for he knew what it had cost him, mentally and physically. Lean as he had been before, he had grown perceptibly thinner since Monday. He knew that, so far, he had succeeded. For the first time, perhaps, he had every point of justice

on his side. If he had been inclined to be merciful and humble and submissive towards those who doubted him now, he would not have been human. The two beings whom he loved in the world, his mother and Katharine, were the very two who had doubted him most. As for his mother, he had not persuaded her, for she had persuaded herself — by means of such demonstration as no sane being could have rejected, namely, the authoritative statement of a great doctor, personally known to her. What had followed had produced a strange result, for he felt that he was more closely bound to her than ever before, a fact which showed, at least, that he did not bear malice, however deeply he had been hurt. But he could not go about everywhere for a week with Doctor Routh at his heels to swear to his sobriety. He told himself so with some contempt, and then he thought of Katharine, and his face grew harder as the minutes went by and no answer came to his letter.

It was far more cruel of her than it had been in his mother's case. Katharine had only heard stories and reports of his doings, and she should be willing to accept his denial of them on her faith in him. He had never lied to her. On Wednesday night, he had gratuitously told her the truth about himself — a truth which she had never suspected — and had insisted upon making it out to

be even worse than it was. His wisdom told him that he had made a mistake then, in wilfully lowering himself in her estimation, and that this was the consequence of that; if he had not forced upon her an unnecessary confession of his weakness, she would now have believed in his strength. But his sense of honour rose and shamed his wisdom, and told him that he had done right. It would have been a cowardly thing to accept what Katharine had then been forcing upon him, and had actually made him accept, without telling her all the truth about himself.

He had done wrong to yield at all. That he admitted, and repeated, readily enough. He made no pretence of having a strong character, and he had been wretchedly weak in allowing her to persuade him to the secret marriage. He should have folded his arms and refused, from the first. He had foreseen trouble, though not of the kind which had actually overtaken him, and he should have been firm. Unfortunately, he was not firm, by nature, as he told himself, with a sneer. Not that Katharine had been to blame, either. She had made her reasons seem good, and he should not have blamed her had she been ever so much in the wrong. There his honour spoke again, and loudly.

But for what she was doing now, in keeping silence, leaving him without a word when she must

know that he was most in need of her faith and belief — for abandoning him when it seemed as though every man's hand were turned against him — he could not help despising her. It was so cowardly. Had it all been ten times true, she should have stood by him when every one was abusing him.

It was far more cruel of her than of his mother, for all she knew of the story had reached her by hearsay, whereas his mother had seen him, as he had seen himself, and his appearance might well have deceived any one but Doctor Routh. He did not ask himself whether he could ever forgive her, for he did not wish to hear in his heart the answer which seemed inevitable. As for loving her, or not loving her, he thought nothing about it at that moment. With him, too, as with her, love was in a state of suspended animation. It would have been sufficiently clear to any outsider acquainted with the circumstances that when the two met that evening, something unusual would probably occur. Katharine, indeed, believed that John would not appear at the dinner-party; but John, who firmly intended to be present, knew that Katharine was going, and he expected to be placed beside her. It was perfectly well known that they were in love with one another, and the least their greatest friends could do was to let them enjoy one another's society.

This may have been done partly as a matter of policy, for both were young enough and tactless enough to show their annoyance if they were separated when they chanced to be asked to sit at the same table. John looked forward to the coming evening with some curiosity, and without any timidity, but also without any anticipation of enjoyment.

He was trying to imagine what the conversation would be like, when Frank Miner returned, beaming with enthusiasm, and glowing from his walk in the cold, wet air. He had been gone a long time.

"Well?" asked John, as his friend came up to the fire, and held out his hands to it.

"Very well — very well, indeed, thank you," answered the latter, with a cheerful laugh. "I'll bet you twenty-five cents to a gold watch that you can't guess what's happened — at Routh's."

"Twenty-five cents — to a gold watch? Oh — I see. Thank you — the odds don't tempt me. What did happen?"

"I say — those were awfully good cigars of yours, Jack!" exclaimed Miner, by way of answer. "Haven't you got another?"

"There's the box. Take them all. What happened?"

"No — I'll only take one — it would look like borrowing if I took two, and I can't return them.

Jack, there's a lot of good blood knocking about in this family, do you know? I don't mean about the cigars — I'm naturally a generous man when it comes to taking things I like. But the other thing. Do you know that somebody had been to Routh about making him write the letter, before I got there?"

"What? To make him write it? Not Ham Bright? It would be like him — but how should he have known about Routh?"

"No. It wasn't Bright. Want to guess? Well — I'll tell you. It was your mother, Jack. Nice of her, wasn't it?"

"My mother!"

Ralston leaned forward and began to poke the logs about. He felt a curious sensation of gladness in the eyes, and weakness in the throat.

"Tell me about it, Frank," he added, in a rather thick voice.

"There's not much to tell. I marched in and stated my case. He's between seven and eight feet high, I believe, and he stood up all the time — felt as though I were talking to scaffold poles. He listened in the calmest way till I'd finished, and then took up a letter from his desk and handed it to me to read and to see whether I thought it would do. I asked what it meant, and he said he'd just written it at the request of Mrs. Ralston, who had left him a quarter of an hour ago, and that if

I would take it to the proper quarter — as he expressed it — he should be much obliged. He's a brick — a tower of strength — a tower of bricks — a perfect Babel of a man. You'll see, when the evening papers come out — "

"Did you take it down town?"

"Of course. And I got hold of one of the big editors. I sent in word that I had a letter from Doctor Routh which must be published in the front page this evening unless the paper wanted Mr. Robert Lauderdale to bring an action against them for libel to-morrow morning. You should have seen things move. What a power cousin Robert is! I suppose I took his name in vain — but I don't care. Old Routh is not to be sneezed at, either. You'll see the letter. There's some good old English in it. Oh, it's just prickly with epithets — 'unwarrantable liberty,' 'impertinent scurrility' — I don't know what the old doctor had for breakfast. It's not like him to come out like that, not a bit. He's a cautious old bird, as a rule, and not given to slinging English all over the ten-acre lot, like that. You see, he takes the ground that you're his patient, that you had some sort of confustication of the back of your head, and that to say that you were screwed when you were ill was a libel, that the terms in which the editor had allowed the thing to appear proved that it was malicious, and that as the editor was supposed to

exercise some control, and to use his own will in the matter of what he published and circulated, it was wilfully published, since the city paid for places in which people who had no control over their wills were kept for the public safety, and that therefore the paragraph in question was a wilfully malicious libel evidently published with the intention of doing harm — and much more of the same kind of thing — all of which the editor would have put into the waste paper basket if it had not been signed, Martin Routh, M.D., with the old gentleman's address. Moreover, the editor asked me why, in sending in a message, I had made use of threatening language purporting to come from Mr. Robert Lauderdale. But as you had told me the whole story, I knew what to say. I just told him that you had left the house of your uncle, Mr. Robert Lauderdale, after spending some time with him, when you met with the accident in the street which led to all your subsequent adventures. That seemed to settle him. He said the whole thing had been a mistake, and that he should be very sorry to have given Mr. Lauderdale any annoyance, especially at this time. I don't know what he meant by that, I'm sure — unless uncle Robert is going to buy the paper for a day or two to see what it's like — you know the proprietor's dead, and they say the heirs are going to sell. Well — that's all. Confound it, my cigar's out. I'm a great deal too good to you, Jack!"

Ralston had listened without comment while the little man told his story, satisfied, as he proceeded from point to point, that everything was going well for him, at last, and mentally reducing Miner's strong expressions to the lowest key of probability.

"So it was my mother who went first to Doctor Routh," he said, as though talking with himself, while Miner relighted his cigar.

"Yes," answered Miner, between two puffs. "I confess to having been impressed."

"It's like her," said John. "It's just like her. You didn't happen to see any note for me lying on the hall table, did you?" he asked, rather irrelevantly.

"No — but I'll go and look, if you like."

"Oh — it's no matter. Besides, they know I haven't been out this morning, and they'd bring anything up. I'm very much obliged to you, Frank, for all this. And I know that you'll tell anybody who talks about it just what I've told you. I should like to feel that there's a chance of some one's knowing the truth when I come into the room this evening."

"Oh, they'll all know it by that time. Routh's letter will run along the ground like fire mingled with hail. As for Teddy Van De Water, he lives on the papers. Of course they won't fly at you and congratulate you all over, and that sort of thing.

They'll just behave as though nothing at all had happened, and afterwards, when we men are by ourselves, smoking, they'll all begin to ask you how it happened. That is, unless you want to tell the story yourself at table, and in that case I'll set you on, as I said."

"I don't care to talk about it," answered John. "But — look here, Frank — listen! You're as quick as anybody to see things. If you notice that a number of the set don't know about Routh's letter — that there's a sort of hostile feeling against me at table — why, then just set me on, as you call it, and I'll defend myself. You see, I've such a bad temper, and my bones ache, and I'm altogether so generally knocked out, that it will be much better to give me my head with for a clear run, than to let people look as though they should like to turn their backs on me, but didn't dare to. Do you understand?"

"All right, Jack. I won't make any mistake about it."

"Very well, then. It's a bargain. We won't say anything more about it."

Miner presently took his departure, and John was left alone again. In the course of time he gave up looking at his watch, and relinquished all hope of hearing from Katharine. Little by little, the certainty formed itself in his mind that the meeting that evening was to be a hostile one.

Not very long after Miner had gone, another hand opened the door, and John sprang to his feet, for even in the slight sound he recognized the touch. Mrs. Ralston entered the room. With more impulsiveness than was usual in him he went quickly to meet her, and threw his arms round her, kissing her through her veil, damp and cold from the snowy air.

"Mother, darling — how good you are!" he exclaimed softly. "There isn't anybody like you — really."

"Why — Jack? What is it?" asked Mrs. Ralston, happy, but not understanding.

"Miner was here — he told me about your having been to old Routh to make him write — "

"That? Oh — that's nothing. Of course I went — the first thing. Didn't he say last night that he'd give his evidence in a court of law? I thought he might just as well do it. The business is all settled, dear boy. I've seen the lawyer, and he's making out the deed. He'll bring it here for me to sign when he comes up from his office, and the transfers of the titles will be registered to-morrow morning — just in time before Sunday."

"Don't talk about that, mother!" answered John. "I didn't want you to do it, and it's never going to make the slightest difference between us."

"Well — perhaps not. But it makes all the difference to me. Promise me one thing, Jack."

"Yes, mother — anything you like."

"Promise me to remember that if you and Katharine choose to get married, in spite of her father and all the Lauderdales, this is your house, and that you have a right to it. You won't have much to live on, but you won't starve. Promise me to remember that, Jack. Will you?"

"I'll promise to remember it, mother. But I'll not promise to act on it."

"Well — that's a matter for your judgment. Go and get ready for luncheon. It must be time."

Once more John put his arms round her neck, and drew her close to him.

"You're very good to me, mother — thank you!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

KATHARINE spent more time than necessary over dressing for dinner on that evening, not because she bestowed more attention than usual upon her appearance, but because there were long pauses of which she was scarcely conscious, although the maid reminded her from time to time that it was growing late. The result, however, was satisfactory in the opinion of her assistant, a sober-minded Scotch person of severe tastes, who preferred black and white to any colours whatsoever, and thought that the trees showed decided frivolity in being green, and that the woods in autumn were positively improper.

It was undoubtedly true that the simple black gown, without ornament and with very little to break its sweeping line, was as becoming to Katharine's strong beauty as it was appropriate to her frame of mind. It made her look older than she was, perhaps, but being so young, the loss was almost gain. It gave her dignity a background and a reason, as it were. Her face was pale still, but not noticeably so, and her eyes were quiet if not soft. Only a person who knew her very well

would have observed the slight but steady contraction of the broad eyebrows, which was unusual. As a rule, if it came at all, it disappeared almost instantly again. She remembered afterwards — as one remembers the absurd details of one's own thoughts — that when she had looked into the mirror for the last time, she had been glad that her front hair did not curl, and that she had never yielded to the temptation to make it curl, as most girls did. She had been pleased by the simplicity of the two thick, black waves which lay across the clear paleness of her forehead, like dark velvet on cream-white silk. She forgot the thought instantly, but, later, she remembered how severe and straight it had looked, and the consciousness was of some value to her — as the least vain man, taken unexpectedly to meet and address a great assembly, may be momentarily glad if he chances to be wearing a particularly good coat. The gravest of us have some consciousness of our own appearance, and be our strength what it may, when it is appropriate to appear in the wedding garment, it is good for us to be wearing one.

Katharine stopped at her mother's door as she descended the stairs. Mrs. Lauderdale was dining at home, and the Lauderdales dined at eight o'clock, so that she was still in her room at ten minutes before the hour. Katharine knocked and entered. Her mother was standing before

the mirror. The door which led to her father's dressing-room, by a short passage between two wardrobes built into the house, was wide open. Katharine heard him moving some small objects on his dressing-table.

"You're late, child," said Mrs. Lauderdale, not turning, for as Katharine entered, she could see her reflection in the mirror. "Are you going to take Jane with you? If not, I wish you'd tell her to come here, as you go down — I let you have her because I knew you'd be late."

"No," answered Katharine, "I don't want her — she's only in the way. It's the Van De Waters', you know. Good night, mother."

"Good night, darling — enjoy yourself — you'll be late, of course — they'll dance, or something."

"Yes — but I shan't stay. I'm tired. Good night again."

Katharine was going to the door, when her father appeared from his dressing-room, serenely correct, as usual, but wearing his black tie because no one was coming to dinner.

"I want to speak to you, Katharine," he said.

She turned and stood still in the middle of the room, facing him. He had a letter in his hand.

"Yes, papa," she answered quietly, not anticipating trouble.

"I'm sorry I could not see you earlier," said Alexander Junior, coming forward and fixing his

steely eyes on his daughter's face. "But I hadn't an opportunity, because I was told that you were asleep when I came home. This morning, as I was leaving the house as usual, a messenger put this letter into my hands. It has a special delivery stamp on it, and you will see that the mark on the dial edge stands at eight forty-five A.M. Consequently, the boy who brought it was dilatory in doing his duty. It is addressed to you in John Ralston's handwriting."

"Why didn't you send it up to me, instead of keeping it all day?" enquired Katharine, with cold surprise.

"Because I do not intend that you shall read it," answered her father, his lips opening and shutting on the words like the shears of a cutting-machine.

Mrs. Lauderdale turned round from the mirror and looked at her husband and daughter. It would have been impossible to tell from her face whether she had been warned of what was to be done or not, but there was an odd little gleam in her eyes, of something which might have been annoyance or satisfaction.

"Why don't you intend me to read my letters?" asked Katharine in a lower tone.

"I don't wish you to correspond with John Ralston," answered Alexander Junior. "You shall never marry him with my consent, especially since

he has disgraced himself publicly as he did yesterday. There was an account of his doings in the morning papers. I daresay you've not seen it. He was taken home last night in a state of beastly intoxication by two policemen, having been picked up by them out of a drunken brawl with a prize-fighter. To judge from the handwriting of the address on this letter, it appears to have been written while he was still under the influence of liquor. I don't mean that my daughter shall receive letters written by drunken men, if I can help it."

"Show me the letter," said Katharine, quietly.

"I'll show it to you because, though you've never had any reason to doubt my statements, I wish you to have actually seen that it has not been opened by me, nor by any one. My judgment is formed from the handwriting solely, but I may add that it is impossible that a man who was admittedly in a state of unconsciousness from liquor at one o'clock in the morning, should be fit to write a letter to Katharine Lauderdale, or to any lady, within six hours. The postmark on the envelope is seven-thirty. Am I right?" He turned deliberately to Mrs. Lauderdale.

"Perfectly," she answered, with sincere conviction.

And it must be allowed that, from his point of view, he was not wrong. He beckoned Katharine

to the gas-light beside the mirror and held up the letter, holding it at the two sides of the square envelope in the firm grip of his big, thin fingers, as though he feared lest she should try to take it. But Katharine did not raise her hands, as she bent forward and inspected the address. It was assuredly not written in John's ordinary hand, though the writing was recognizable as his, beyond doubt. There was an evident attempt at regularity, but a too evident failure. It looked a little as though he had attempted to write with his left hand. At one corner there was a very small stain of blood, which, as every one knows, retains its colour on writing paper, even under gas-light, for a considerable time. It will be remembered that John had hurt his right hand.

Katharine's brows contracted more heavily. She was disgusted, but she was also pained. She looked long and steadily at the writing, and her lips curled slightly. Alexander Lauderdale turned the letter over to show her that it was sealed. Again, where the finger had hurriedly pressed the gummed edge of the envelope, there was a little mark of blood. Katharine drew back very proudly, as from something at once repulsive and beneath her woman's dignity. Her father looked at her keenly and coldly.

"Have you satisfied yourself?" he enquired. "You see that it has not been opened, do you?"

"Yes."

"I will burn it," said Alexander Lauderdale, still watching her.

"Yes."

He seemed surprised, for he had expected resistance, and perhaps some attempt on her part to get possession of the letter and read it. But she stood upright, silent, and evidently disgusted. He lifted his hand and held the letter over the flame of the gas-light until it had caught fire thoroughly. Then he laid it in the fireless grate — the room, like all the rest of the house, was heated by the furnace, — and with his usual precise interpretation of his own conscience's promptings, he turned his back on it, lest by any chance he should see and accidentally read any word of the contents as the paper curled and flared and blackened and fell to ashes. Katharine, however, was well aware that a folded letter within its envelope will rarely burn through and through if left to itself. She went to the hearth and watched it. It had fallen flat upon the tiles, and one thickness after another flamed, rose from one end and curled away as the one beneath it took fire. She would not attempt to read one of the indistinct words, but she could not help seeing that it had been a long letter, scrawled in a handwriting even more irregular than that on the envelope. The leaves turned black, one by one, rising and remaining upright like black

funeral feathers, till at last there was only a little blue light far down in the heart of them. That, too, went out, and a small, final puff of smoke rose and vanished. Katharine turned the heap over with the tongs. Only one little yellow bit of paper remained unconsumed at the bottom. It was almost round, and as she turned it over, she read on it the number of the house. That was all that had not been burned.

"I'm glad to see that you look at the matter in its true light," said her father, as she stood up again.

"How should I look at it?" asked Katharine, coldly. "Good night, mother — good night," she repeated, nodding to her father.

She turned and left the room. A moment later she was on her way to the Van De Waters' house, leaning back in the dark, comfortable brougham, her feet toasting on the foot-warmer, and the furs drawn up closely round her. It was a bitterly cold night, for a sharp frost had succeeded the snow-storm after sunset. Even inside the carriage Katharine could feel that there was something hard and ringing in the quality of the air which was in harmony with her own temper. She had plenty of time to go over the scene which had taken place in her mother's room, but she felt no inclination to analyze her feelings. She only knew that this letter of John's, written when he was

still half senseless with drink, was another insult, and one deeper than any she had felt before. It was a direct insult — a sin of commission, and not merely of omission, like his absence from the ball on the previous night.

She supposed, naturally enough, that he would not appear at the dinner-party, but at that moment she was almost indifferent as to whether he should come or not. She was certainly not afraid to meet him. It would be far more probable, she thought, that he should be afraid to meet her.

It was a quarter past eight when she reached the Van De Waters', and she was the last to arrive. It was a party of sixteen, almost all very young, and most of them unmarried — a party very carefully selected with a view to enjoyment — an intimate party, because many out of the number were more or less closely connected and related, and it was indicative of the popularity of the Lauderdales, that amongst sixteen young persons there should be four who belonged more or less to the Lauderdale tribe. There was Katharine, there was Hamilton Bright, — the Crowdies had been omitted because so many disliked Crowdie himself, — there was little Frank Miner, who was a near relation of the Van De Waters, and there stood John Ralston, talking to Ruth Van De Water, before Crowdie's new portrait of her, as though nothing had happened.

Katharine saw him the moment she entered the room, and he knew, as he heard the door opened, that she must be the last comer, since every one else had arrived. Without interrupting his conversation with Miss Van De Water, he turned his head a little and met Katharine's eyes. He bowed just perceptibly, but she gave him no sign of recognition, which was pardonable, however, as he knew, since there were people between them, and she had not yet spoken to Ruth herself, who, with her brother, had invited the party. The elder Van De Waters had left the house to the young people, and had betaken themselves elsewhere for the evening.

John continued to talk quietly, as Katharine came forward. As he had expected, he had found her name on the card in the little envelope which had been handed to him when he arrived, and he was to take her in to dinner. Until late in the afternoon the brother and sister had hoped that John would not come, and had already decided to ask in his place that excellent man, Mr. Brown, who was always so kind about coming when asked at the last minute. Then Frank Miner had appeared, with an evening paper containing Doctor Routh's letter, and had explained the whole matter, so that they felt sympathy for John rather than otherwise, though no one had as yet broached to him the subject of his adventures. Naturally enough, the Van De Waters both supposed that

Katharine should have been among the first to hear the true version of the story, and they would not disarrange their table in order to separate two young people who were generally thought to be engaged to be married. There were, of course, a few present who had not heard of Doctor Routh's justification of John.

Katharine came across directly, towards Ruth Van De Water, and greeted her affectionately. John came forward a little, waiting to be noticed and to shake hands in his turn. Katharine prolonged the first exchange of words with her young hostess rather unnecessarily, and then, since she could not avoid the meeting, held out her hand to John, looking straight and coldly into his eyes.

"You're to take Miss Lauderdale in, you know, Mr. Ralston," said Miss Van De Water, who knew that dinner would be announced almost immediately, and that Katharine would wish to speak to the other guests before sitting down.

"Yes — I found my card," answered John, as Katharine withdrew her hand without having given his the slightest pressure.

It was a strange meeting, considering that they had been man and wife since the previous morning, and could hardly be said to have met since they had parted after the wedding. Katharine, who was cold and angry, wondered what all those young people would say if she suddenly announced to

them, at table, that John Ralston was her husband. But just then she had no definite intention of ever announcing the fact at all.

John only partly understood, for he was sure that she must have received his letter. But what he saw was enough to convince him that she had not in the least believed what he had written, and had not meant to answer him. He was pale and haggard already, but during the few minutes that followed, while Katharine moved about the room, greeting her friends, the strong lines deepened about his mouth and the shadows under his eyes grew perceptibly darker.

A few minutes later the wide doors were thrown back and dinner was announced. Without hesitation he went to Katharine's side, and waited while she finished speaking with young Mrs. Vanbrugh, his right arm slightly raised as he silently offered it.

Katharine deliberately finished her sentence, nodded and smiled to Dolly Vanbrugh, who was a friend of hers, and had been in some way concerned in the famous Darche affair three or four years ago, as Mrs. Darche's intimate and confidante. Then she allowed her expression to harden again, and she laid her hand on John's arm and they all moved in to dinner.

"I'm sorry," said John, in a low, cold voice. "I suppose they couldn't upset their table."

Katharine said nothing, but looked straight before her as they traversed one beautiful room after another, going through the great house to the dining-room at the back.

"You got my letter, I suppose," said John, speaking again as they crossed the threshold of the last door but one, and came in sight of the table, gleaming in the distance under soft lights.

Katharine made a slight inclination of the head by way of answer, but still said nothing. John thought that she moved her hand, as though she would have liked to withdraw it from his arm, and he, for his part, would gladly have let it go at that moment.

It was a very brilliant party, of the sort which could hardly be gathered anywhere except in America, where young people are not unfrequently allowed to amuse themselves together in their own way without the interference or even the presence of elders — young people born to the possession, in abundance, of most things which the world thinks good, and as often as anywhere, too, to the inheritance of things good in themselves, besides great wealth — such as beauty, health, a fair share of wit, and the cheerful heart, without which all else is as ashes.

Near one end of the table sat Frank Miner, who had taken in Mrs. Vanbrugh, and who was amusing every one with absurd stories and jokes — the

small change of wit, but small change that was bright and new, ringing from his busy little mint.

At the other end sat Teddy Van De Water, a good fellow at heart in spite of his eyeglass and his affectations, discussing yachts and centreboards and fin-keels with Fanny Trehearne, a girl who sailed her own boats at Newport and Bar Harbor, and who cared for little else except music, strange to say. Nearly opposite to Katharine and John was Hamilton Bright, between two young girls, talking steadily and quietly about society, but evidently much preoccupied, and far more inclined to look at Katharine than at his pretty neighbours. He had seen Routh's letter, and had, moreover, exchanged a few words with Ralston in the hall, having arrived almost at the same instant, and he saw that Katharine did not understand the truth. Ralston had begun by apologizing to his friend for what had happened at the club, but Bright, who bore no malice, had stopped him with a hearty shake of the hand, and a challenge to wrestle with him any day, for the honour of the thing, in the hall of the club or anywhere else.

Frank Miner, too, from a distance, watched John and Katharine, and saw that the trouble was great, though he laughed and chatted and told stories, as though he were thoroughly enjoying himself. In reality he was debating whether he should not bring up the subject which must be

near to every one's thoughts, and give John a chance of telling his own story. Seeing how the rest of the people were taking the affair, he would not have done so, since all was pleasant and easy, but he saw also that John could not possibly have an explanation with Katharine at table, and that both were suffering. His kindly heart decided the question. It would be a very easy matter to accomplish, and he waited for a convenient opportunity of attracting attention to himself, so as to obtain the ear of the whole large table, before he began. He was perfectly conscious of his own extreme popularity, and knew that, for once, he could presume upon it, though he was quite unspoiled by a long career of little social successes.

John and Katharine exchanged a few words from time to time, for the sake of appearances, in a coldly civil tone, and without the slightest expression of interest in one another. John spoke of the weather, and Katharine admitted that it had been very bad of late. She observed that Miss Van De Water was looking very well, and that a greenish blue was becoming to fair people. John answered that he had expected to hear of Miss Van De Water's engagement to that foreigner whose name he had forgotten, and Katharine replied that he was not a foreigner but an Englishman, and that his name was Northallerton, or something like that. John said he had heard that they had

first met in Paris, and Katharine took some salt upon her plate and admitted that it was quite possible. She grew more coldly wrathful with every minute, and the iron entered into John's soul, and he gave up trying to talk to her — of which she was very glad.

It was some time before the occasion which Miner sought presented itself, and the dinner proceeded brilliantly enough amid the laughter of young voices and the gladness of young eyes. For young eyes see flowers where old ones see but botany, so to speak.

Katharine had not believed that it would hurt her as it did, nor Ralston that love could seem so far away. They turned from each other and talked with their neighbours. John almost thought that Katharine once or twice gathered her black skirts nearer to her, as though to keep them from a sort of contamination. He was on her left, and he was conscious that in pretending to eat he used his right arm very cautiously because he did not wish even to run the risk of touching hers by accident.

Now, in the course of events, it happened that the subject of yachts travelled from neighbour to neighbour, as subjects sometimes do at big dinners, until, having been started by Teddy Van De Water and Fanny Trehearne, it came up the table to Frank Miner. He immediately saw his chance, and plunged into his subject.

"Oh, I don't take any interest in yacht races, compared with prize fights, since Jack Ralston has gone into the ring!" he said, and his high, clear voice made the words ring down the table with the cheery, laughing cadence after them.

"What's that about me, Frank?" asked John, speaking over Katharine's head as she bent away from him towards Russell Vanbrugh, who was next to her on the other side.

"Oh, nothing — talking about your round with Tom Shelton. Tell us all about it, Jack. Don't be modest. You're the only man here who's ever stood up to a champion prize-fighter without the gloves on, and it seems you hit him, too. You needn't be ashamed of it."

"I'm not in the least ashamed of it," answered Ralston, unbending a little.

He spoke in a dead silence, and all eyes were turned upon him. But he said nothing more. Even the butler and the footmen, every one of whom had read both the morning and the evening papers, paused and held their breath, and looked at John with admiration.

"Go ahead, Ralston!" cried Teddy Van De Water, from his end. "Some of us haven't heard the story, though everybody saw those horrid things in the papers this morning. It was too bad!"

Katharine had attempted to continue her conversation with Russell Vanbrugh, but it had proved

impossible. Moreover, she was herself almost breathless with surprise at the sudden appeal to Ralston himself, when she had been taking it for granted that every one present, including his hosts, despised him, and secretly wished that he had not come.

Van De Water had spoken from the end of the table. Frank Miner responded again from the other, looking hard at Katharine's blank face, as he addressed John.

"Tell it, Jack!" he cried. "Don't be foolish. Everybody wants to know how it happened."

Ralston looked round the table once more, and saw that every one was expecting him to speak, all with curiosity, and some of the men with admiration. His eyes rested on Katharine for a moment, but she turned from him instantly — not coldly, as before, but as though she did not wish to meet his glance.

"I can't tell a story by halves," said he. "If you really want to have it, you must hear it from the beginning. But I told Frank Miner this morning — he can tell it better than I."

"Go on, Jack — you're only keeping everybody waiting!" said Hamilton Bright, from across the table. "Tell it all — about me, too — it will make them laugh."

John saw the honest friendship in the strong Saxon face, and knew that to tell the whole story was his best plan.

"All right," he said. "I'll do my best. It won't take long. In the first place — you won't mind my going into details, Miss Van De Water?"

"Oh, no — we should rather prefer it," laughed the young girl, from her distant place.

"Then I'll go on. I've been going in for reform lately — I began last Monday morning. Yes — of course you all laugh, because I've not much of a reputation for reform, or anything else. But the statement is necessary because it's true, and bears on the subject. Reform means claret and soda, and very little of that. It had rather affected my temper, as I wasn't used to it, and I was sitting in the club yesterday afternoon, trying to read a paper and worrying about things generally, when Frank, there, wanted me to drink with him, and I wouldn't, and I didn't choose to tell him I was trying to be good, because I wasn't sure that I was going to be. Anyhow, he wouldn't take 'no,' and I wouldn't say 'yes' — and so I suppose I behaved rather rudely to him."

"Like a fiend!" observed Miner, from a distance.

"Exactly. Then I was called to the telephone, and found that my uncle Robert wanted me at once, that very moment, and wouldn't say why. So I came back in a hurry, and as I was coming out of the cloak-room with my hat and coat on I ran into Bright, who generally saves my life when the thing is to be done promptly. I suppose I looked rather wild, didn't I, Ham?"

"Rather. You were white — and queer altogether. I thought you 'had it bad.'"

There was a titter and a laugh, as the two men looked at one another and smiled.

"Well, you've not often been wrong, Ham," said Ralston, laughing too. "I don't propose to let my guardian angel lead a life of happy idleness — "

"Keep an angel, and save yourself," suggested Miner.

"Don't make them laugh till I've finished," said Ralston, "or they won't understand. Well — Ham tried to hold me, and I wouldn't be held. He's about twenty times stronger than I am, anyhow, and he'd got hold of my arm — wanted to calm me before I went out, as he thought. I lost my temper — "

"Your family's been advertising a reward if it's found, ever since you were born," observed Miner.

"Suppress that man, can't you — somebody?" cried Ralston, good-naturedly. "So I tripped Bright up under Miner's nose — and there was Crowdie there, and a couple of servants, so it was rather a public affair. I got out of the door, and made for the park — uncle Robert's, you know. Being in a rage, I walked, and passing the Murray Hill Hotel, I went in, from sheer force of habit, and ordered a cocktail. I hadn't more than tasted it when I remembered what I was about, and promptly did the Spartan dodge — to the surprise

of the bar-tender — and put it down and went out. Then uncle Robert and I had rather a warm discussion. Unfortunately, too, just that drop of whiskey — forgive the details, Miss Van De Water — you know I warned you — just that drop of whiskey I had touched was distinctly perceptible to the old gentleman's nostrils, and he began to call me names, and I got angry, and being excited already, I daresay he really thought I wasn't sober. Anyhow, he managed to knock my hat out of my hand and smash it — ask him the first time you see him, if any of you doubt it."

"Oh, nobody doubts you, Jack," said Teddy Van De Water, vehemently. "Don't be an idiot!"

"Thank you, Teddy," laughed Ralston. "Well, the next thing was that I bolted out of the house with a smashed hat, and forgot my overcoat in my rage. It's there still, hanging in uncle Robert's hall. And, of course, being so angry, I never thought of my hat. It must have looked oddly enough. I went down Fifth Avenue, past the reservoir — nearly a mile in that state."

"I met you," observed Russell Vanbrugh. "I was just coming home — been late down town. I thought you looked rather seedy, but you walked straight enough."

"Of course I did — being perfectly sober, and only angry. I must have turned into East Fortieth or Thirty-ninth, when I stopped to light a

cigar. The waxlight dazzled me, I suppose, for when I went on I fell over something — that street is awfully dark after the avenue — and I hurt my head and my hand. This finger — "

He held up his right hand of which one finger was encased in black silk. Katharine remembered the spot of blood on the letter.

"Then I don't know what happened to me. Doctor Routh said I had a concussion of the brain and lost the sense of direction, but I lost my senses, anyhow. Have any of you fellows ever had that happen to you? It's awfully queer?"

"I have," said Bright. "I know — you're all right, but you can't tell where you're going."

"Exactly — you can't tell which is right and which is left. You recognize houses, but don't know which way to turn to get to your own. I lost myself in New York. I'm glad I've had the experience, but I don't want it again. Do you know where I found myself and got my direction again? Away down in Tompkins Square. It was ten o'clock, and I'd missed a dinner-party, and thought I should just have time to get home and dress, and go to the Assembly. But I wasn't meant to. I was dazed and queer still, and it had been snowing for hours and I had no overcoat. I found a horse-car going up town and got on. There was nobody else on it but that prize-fighter chap, who turns out to have been Tom Shelton.

It was nice and warm in the car, and I must have been pretty well fagged out, for I sat down at the upper end and dropped asleep without telling the conductor to wake me at my street. I never fell asleep in a horse-car before in my life, and didn't expect to then. I don't know what happened after that — at least not distinctly. They must have tried to wake me with kicks and screams, or something, for I remember hitting out, and then a struggle, and I was pitched out into the snow by the conductor and the prize-fighter. Of course I jumped up and made for the fighting man, and I remember hearing something about a fair fight, and then a lot of men came running up with lanterns, and I was squaring up to Tom Shelton. I caught him one on the mouth, and I suppose that roused him. I can see that right-hand counter of his coming at me now, but I couldn't stop it for the life of me — and that was the last I saw, until I opened my eyes in my own room and saw my mother looking at me. She sent for Doctor Routh, and he saw that I wasn't going to die and went home, leaving everybody considerably relieved. But he wasn't at all sure that I hadn't been larking, when he first came, so he took the trouble to make a thorough examination. I wasn't really hurt much, and though I'd had such a crack from Shelton, and the other one when I tumbled in the dark, I had pretty nearly an hour's sleep in the horse-car

as a set-off. Then my mother brought me things to eat — of course all the servants were in bed, and she'd rung for a messenger in order to send for Routh. And I sat up and wrote a long letter before I went to bed, though it wasn't easy work, with my hand hurt and my head rather queer. I wish I hadn't, though — it was more to show that I could, than anything else. There — I think I've told you the whole story. I'm sorry I couldn't make it shorter."

"It wasn't at all too long, Jack," said Katharine, in clear and gentle tones.

She was very white as she turned her face to him. Every one agreed with her, and every one began talking at once. But John did not look at her. He answered some question put to him by the young girl on his left, and at once entered into conversation at that side, without taking any more notice of Katharine than she had taken of him before.

CHAPTER XXX.

The dinner was almost at an end, when John spoke to Katharine again. Every one was laughing and talking at once. The point had been reached at which young people laugh at anything out of sheer good spirits, and Frank Miner had only to open his lips, at his end of the table, to set the clear voices ringing; while at the other, Teddy Van De Water, whose conversational powers were not brilliant, but who possessed considerable power over his fresh, thin, plain young face, excited undeserved applause by putting up his eyeglass every other minute, staring solemnly at John as the hero of the evening, and then dropping it with a ridiculous little smirk, supposed to be expressive of admiration and respect.

John saw him do it two or three times, while turning towards him in the act of talking to his neighbour on his left, and smiled good-naturedly at each repetition of the trick. To tell the truth, the evident turn of feeling in his favour had so far influenced his depressed spirits that he smiled almost naturally, out of sympathy, because every one was so happy and so gay. But he was soon

tired of young Van De Water's joke, before the others were, and looking away in order not to see the eyeglass fall again, he caught sight of Katharine's face.

Her eyes were not upon him, and she might have been supposed to be looking past him at some one seated farther down the table, but she saw him and watched him, nevertheless. She was quite silent now, and her face was pale. He only glanced at her, and was already turning his head away once more when her lips moved.

"Jack!" she said, in a low voice, that trembled but reached his ear, even amidst the peals of laughter which filled the room.

He looked at her again, and his features hardened a little in spite of him. But he knew that Bright, who sat opposite, was watching both Katharine and himself, and he did his best to seem natural and unconcerned.

"What is it?" he asked.

She did not find words immediately with which to answer the simple question, but her face told all that her voice should have said, and more. The contraction of the broad brows was gone at last, and the great grey eyes were soft and pleading.

"You know," she said, at last.

John felt that his lips would have curled rather scornfully, if he had allowed them. He set his

mouth, by an effort, in a hard, civil smile. It was the best he could do, for he had been badly hurt. Repentance sometimes satisfies the offender, but he who has been offended demands blood money. John deserved some credit for saying nothing, and even for his cold, conventional smile.

"Jack — dear — aren't you going to forgive me?" she asked, in a still lower tone than before.

Ralston glanced up and down the table, manlike, to see whether they were watched. But no one was paying any attention to them. Hamilton Bright was looking away, just then.

"Why didn't you answer my letter?" asked John, at last, but he could not disguise the bitterness of his voice.

"I only — it only came — that is — it was this evening, when I was all dressed to come here."

John could not control his expression any longer, and his lip bent contemptuously, in spite of himself.

"It was mailed very early this morning, with a special delivery stamp," he said, coldly.

"Yes, it reached the house — but — oh, Jack! How can I explain, with all these people?"

"It wouldn't be easy without the people," he answered. "Nobody hears what we're saying."

Katharine was silent for a moment, and looked at her plate. In a lover's quarrel, the man has

the advantage, if it takes place in the midst of acquaintances who may see what is happening. He is stronger and, as a rule, cooler, though rarely, at heart, so cold. A woman, to be persuasive, must be more or less demonstrative, and demonstrativeness is visible to others, even from a great distance. Katharine did not belittle the hardness of what she had to do in so far as she reckoned the odds at all. She loved John too well, and knew again that she loved him; and she understood fully how she had injured him, if not how much she had hurt him. She was suffering herself, too, and greatly — much more than she had suffered so long as her anger had lasted, for she knew, too late, that she should have believed in him when others did not, rather than when all were for him and with him, so that she was the very last to take his part. But it was hard, and she tried to think that she had some justification.

After Ralston had finished telling his story, Russell Vanbrugh, who was an eminent criminal lawyer, had commented to her upon the adventure, telling her how men had been hanged upon just such circumstantial evidence, when it had not chanced that such a man as Doctor Routh, at the head of his profession and above all possible suspicion, had intervened in time. She tried to argue that she might be pardoned for being

misled, as she had been. But her conscience told her flatly that she was deceiving herself, that she had really known far less than most of the others about the events of the previous day, some of which were now altogether new to her, that she had judged John in the worst light from the first words she had heard about him at the Assembly ball, and had not even been at pains to examine the circumstances so far as she might have known them. And she remembered how, but a short time previous to the present moment, she had looked at the sealed envelope with disgust — almost with loathing, and had turned over its ashes with the tongs. Yet that letter had cost him a supreme effort of strength and will, made for her sake, when he was bruised and wounded and exhausted with fatigue.

"Jack," she said at last, turning to him again, "I must talk to you. Please come to me right after dinner — when you come back with the men — will you?"

"Certainly," answered John.

He knew that an explanation was inevitable. Oddly enough, though he now had by far the best of the situation, he did not wish that the explanatory interview might come so soon. Perhaps he did not wish for it at all. With Katharine love was alive again, working and suffering. With him there was no response, where love had been.

In its place there was an unformulated longing to be left alone for a time, not to be forced to realize how utterly he had been distrusted and abandoned when he had most needed faith and support. There was an unwilling and unjust comparison of Katharine with his mother, too, which presented itself constantly. Losing the sense of values and forgetting how his mother had denied his word of honour, he remembered only that her disbelief had lasted but an hour, and that hour seemed now but an insignificant moment. She had done so much, too, and at once. He recalled, amid the noise and laughter, the clinking of the things on the little tray she had brought up for him and set down outside his door — a foolish detail, but one of those which strike fast little roots as soon as the seed has fallen. The reaction, too, after all he had gone through, was coming at last and was telling even on his wiry organization. Most men would have broken down already. He wished that he might be spared the necessity of Katharine's explanation — that she would write to him, and that he might read in peace and ponder at his leisure — and answer at his discretion. Yet he knew very well that the situation must be cleared up at once. He regretted having given Katharine but that one word in answer to her appeal — for he did not wish to seem even more unforgiving than he felt.

"I'll come as soon as possible," he said, turning to her. "I'll come now, if you like."

It would have been a satisfaction to have it over at once. But Katharine shook her head.

"You must stay with the men — but — thank you, Jack."

Her voice was very sweet and low. At that moment Ruth Van De Water nodded to her brother, and in an instant all the sixteen chairs were pushed back simultaneously, and the laughter died away in the rustle of soft skirts and the moving of two and thirty slippered feet on the thick carpet.

"No!" cried Miss Van De Water, looking over her shoulder with a little laugh at the man next to her, who offered his arm in the European fashion. "We don't want you — we're not in Washington — we're going to talk about you, and we want to be by ourselves. Stay and smoke your cigars — but not forever, you know," she added, and laughed again, a silvery, girlish laugh.

Ralston stood back and watched the fair young girls and women as they filed out. After all, there was not one that could compare with Katharine — whether he loved her, or not, he added mentally.

When the men were alone, they gathered round him under a great cloud of smoke over their little cups of coffee and their tiny liqueur glasses of

many colours. He had always been more popular than he had been willing to think, which was the reason why so much had been forgiven him. He had assuredly done nothing heroic on the present occasion, unless his manly effort to fight against his taste for drinking was heroic. If it was, the majority of the seven other men did not think of it nor care. But he did not deserve such very great credit even for that, perhaps, for there was that strain of asceticism in him which makes such things easier for some people than for others. Most of them, being young, envied and admired him for having stood up to a champion prize-fighter in fair combat, heavily handicapped as he had been, and for having reached his antagonist once, at least, before he went down. A good deal of the enthusiasm young men occasionally express for one of themselves rests on a similar basis, and yet is not to be altogether despised on that account.

John warmed to something almost approaching to geniality, in the midst of so much good-will, in spite of his many troubles and of the painful interview which was imminent. When Van De Water dropped the end of his cigar and suggested that they should go into the drawing-room and not waste the evening in doing badly what they could do well at their clubs from morning till night, John would have been willing to stay a little

longer. He was very tired. Three or four glasses of wine would have warmed him and revived him earlier, but he had not broken down in his resolution yet — and coffee and cigars were not bad substitutes, after all. The chair was comfortable, it was warm and the lights were soft. He rose rather regretfully and followed the other men through the house to join the ladies.

Without hesitation, since it had to be done, he went up to Katharine at once. She had managed to keep a little apart from the rest, and in the changing of places and positions which followed the entrance of the men, she backed by degrees towards a corner in which there were two vacant easy chairs, one on each side of a little table covered with bits of rare old silver-work, and half shielded from the rest of the room by the end of a grand piano. It would have been too remote a seat for two persons who wished to flirt unnoticed, but Katharine knew perfectly well that most of her friends believed her to be engaged to marry John Ralston, and was quite sure of being left to talk with him in peace if she chose to sit down with him in a corner.

Gravely, now, and with no inclination to let his lips twist contemptuously, John sat down beside her, drawing his chair in front of the small table, and waiting patiently while she settled herself.

"It was impossible to talk at table," she said nervously, and with a slight tremor in her voice.

"Yes — with all those people," assented John.

A short silence followed. Katharine seemed to be choosing her words. She looked calm enough, he thought, and he expected that she would begin to make a deliberate explanation. All at once she put out her hand spasmodically, drew it back again, and began to turn over and handle a tiny fish of Norwegian silver which lay among the other things on the table.

"It's all been a terrible misunderstanding — I don't know where to begin," she said, rather helplessly.

"Tell me what became of my letter," answered John, quietly. "That's the important thing for me to know."

"Yes — of course — well, in the first place, it was put into papa's hands this morning just as he was going down town."

"Did he keep it?" asked Ralston, his anger rising suddenly in his eyes.

"No — that is — he didn't mean to. He thought I was asleep — you see he had read those things in the papers, and was angry and recognized your handwriting — and he thought — you know the handwriting really was rather shaky, Jack."

"I've no doubt. It wasn't easy to write at all, just then."

"Oh, Jack dear! If I'd only known, or guessed — "

"Then you wouldn't have needed to believe a little," answered John. "What did your father do with the letter?"

"He had it in his pocket all day, and brought it home with him in the evening. You see — I'd been out — at the Crowdies' — and then I came home and shut myself up. I was so miserable — and then I fell asleep."

"You were so miserable that you fell asleep," repeated Ralston, cruelly. "I see."

"Jack! Please — please listen to me — "

"Yes. I beg your pardon, Katharine. I'm out of temper. I didn't mean to be rude."

"No, dear. Please don't. I can't bear it." Her lip quivered. "Jack," she began again, after a moment, "please don't say anything till I've told you all I have to say. If you do — no — I can't help it — I'm crying now."

Her eyes were full of tears, and she turned her face away quickly to recover her self-control. John was pained, but just then he could find nothing to say. He bent his head and looked at his hand, affecting not to see how much moved she was.

A moment later she turned to him, and the tears seemed to be gone again, though they were, perhaps, not far away. Strong women can make such efforts in great need.

"I went into my mother's room on my way down to the carriage to come here," she continued. "Papa came in, bringing your letter. He had not opened it, of course — he only wanted to show me that he had received it, and he said he would destroy it after showing it to me. I looked at it — and oh, the handwriting was so shaky, and there were spots on the envelope — Jack — I didn't want to read it. That's the truth. I let him burn it. I turned over the ashes to see that there was nothing left. There — I've told you the truth. How could I know — oh, how could I know?"

John glanced at her and then looked down again, not trusting himself to speak yet. The thought that she had not even wished to read that letter, and that she had stood calmly by while her father destroyed it, deliberately turning over the ashes afterwards, was almost too much to be borne with equanimity. Again he remembered what it had cost him to write it, and how he had felt that, having written it, Katharine, at least, would be loyal to him, whatever the world might say. He would have been a little more than human if he could have then and there smiled, held out his hand, and freely forgiven and promised to forget.

And yet she, too, had some justice on her side, though she was ready and willing to forget it all, and to bear far more of blame than she deserved.

Russell Vanbrugh had told her that a man might easily be convicted on such evidence. Yet in her heart she knew that her disbelief had waited for no proofs last night, but had established itself supreme as her disappointment at John's absence from the ball.

"Jack," she began again, seeing that he did not speak, "say something — say that you'll try to forgive me. It's breaking my heart."

"I'll try," answered John, in a voice without meaning.

"Ah — not that way, dear!" answered Katharine, with a breaking sigh. "Be kind — for the sake of all that has been!"

There was a deep and touching quaver in the words. He could say nothing yet.

"Of all that might have been, Jack — it was only yesterday morning that we were married — dear — and now — "

He lifted his face and looked long into her eyes — she saw nothing but regret, coldness, interrogation in his. And still he was silent, and still she pleaded for forgiveness.

"But it can't be undone, now. It can never be undone — and I'm your wife, though I have distrusted you, and been cruel and heartless and unkind. Don't you see how it all was, dear? Can't you be weak for a moment, just to understand me a little bit? Won't you believe me when

I tell you how I hate myself and despise myself and wish that I could — oh, I don't know! — I wish I could wash it all away, if it were with my heart's blood! I'd give it, every drop, for you, now — dear one — sweetheart — forgive me! forgive me!"

"Don't, Katharine — please don't," said John, in an uncertain tone, and looking away from her again.

"But you must," she cried in her low and pleading voice, leaning far forward, so that she spoke very close to his averted face. "It's my life — it's all I have! Jack — haven't women done as bad things and been forgiven and been loved, too, after all was over? No — I know — oh, God! If I had but known before!"

"Don't talk like that, Katharine!" said Ralston, distressed, if not moved. "What's done is done, and we can't undo it. I made a bad mistake myself —"

"You, Jack? What? Yesterday?" She thought he spoke of their marriage.

"No — the night before — at the Thirlwalls', when I told you that I sometimes drank — and all that —"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Katharine. "You were so right. It was the bravest thing you ever did!"

"And this is the result," said John, bitterly. "I put it all into your head then. You'd never thought

about it before. And of course things looked badly — about yesterday — and you took it for granted. Isn't that the truth?"

"No, dear. It's not — you're 'mistaken. Because I thought you brave, night before last, was no reason why I should have thought you a coward yesterday. No — don't make excuses for me, even in that way. There are none — I want none — I ask for none. Only say that you'll try to forgive me — but not as you said it just now. Mean it, Jack! Oh, try to mean it, if you ever loved me!"

Ralston had not doubted her sincerity for a moment, after he had caught sight of her face when he had finished telling his story at the dinner-table. She loved him with all her heart, and her grief for what she had done was real and deep. But he had been badly hurt. Love was half numb, and would not wake, though his tears were in her voice.

Nevertheless, she had moved John so far that he made an effort to meet her, as it were, and to stretch out his hand to hers across the gulf that divided them.

"Katharine," he said, at last, "don't think me hard and unfeeling. You managed to hurt me pretty badly, that's all. Just when I was down, you turned your back on me, and I cared. I suppose that if I didn't love you, I shouldn't have cared at all, or not so much. Shouldn't you think it strange if I'd been perfectly indifferent, and if I

were to say to you now — 'Oh, never mind — it's all right — it wasn't anything'? It seems to me that would just show that I'd never loved you, and that I had acted like a blackguard in marrying you yesterday morning. Wouldn't it?"

Katharine looked at him, and a gleam of hope came into her eyes. She nodded twice in silence, with close-set lips, waiting to hear what more he would say.

"I don't like to talk of forgiveness and that sort of thing between you and me, either," he continued. "I don't think it's a question of forgiveness. You're not a child, and I'm not your father. I can't exactly forgive — in that sense. I never knew precisely what the word meant, anyhow. They say 'forgive and forget' — but if forgiving an injury isn't forgetting it, what is it? Love bears, but doesn't need to forgive, it seems to me. The forgiveness consists in the bearing. Well, you don't mean to make me bear anything more, do you?"

A smile came into his face, not a very gentle one, but nevertheless a smile. Katharine's hand went out quickly and touched his own.

"No, dear, never," she said simply.

"Well — don't. Perhaps I couldn't bear much more just now. You see, I've loved you very much."

"Don't say it as though it were past, Jack," said Katharine, softly.

"No — I was thinking of the past, that's all."

He paused a moment. His heart was beating a little faster now, and tender words were not so far from his lips as they had been five minutes earlier. He could be silent and still be cold. But she had made him feel that she loved him dearly, and her voice waked the music in his own as he spoke.

"It was because I loved you so, that I felt it all," he said. "A little more than you thought I could — dear."

It was he, now, who put out his hand and touched a fold of her gown which was near him, as she had touched his arm. The tears came back to Katharine's eyes suddenly and unexpectedly, but they did not burn as they had burned before.

"I've never loved any one else," he continued presently. "Yes — and I know you've not. But I'm older, and I know men who have been in love — what they call being in love — twice and three times at my age. I've not. I've never cared for any one but you, and I don't want to. I've been a failure in a good many ways, but I shan't be in that one way. I shall always love you — just the same."

Katharine caught happily at the three little words.

"Just the same — as though all this had never happened, Jack?" she asked, bending towards him, and looking into his brown eyes. "If you'll say that again, dear, I shall be quite happy."

"Yes — in a way — just the same," answered Ralston, as though weighing his words.

Katharine's face fell.

"There's a reservation, dear — I knew there would be," she said, with a sigh.

"No," answered Ralston. "Only I didn't want to say more than just what I meant. I've been angry myself — I was angry at dinner — perhaps I was angry still when I sat down here. I don't know. I didn't mean to be. It's hard to say exactly what I do mean. I love you — just the same as ever. Only we've both been very angry and shall never forget that we have been, though we may wonder some day why we were. Do you understand? It's not very clear, but I'm not good at talking."

"Yes." Katharine's face grew brighter again. "Yes," she repeated, a moment later; "it's what I feel — only I wish that you might not feel it, because it's all my fault — all of it. And yet — oh, Jack! It seems to me that I never loved you as I do now — somehow, you seem dearer to me since I've hurt you, and you've forgiven me — but I wasn't to say that!"

"No, dear — don't talk of forgiveness. Tell me you love me — I'd rather hear it."

"So would I — from you, Jack!"

Some one had sat down at the piano. The keyboard was away from them, so that they could not

see who it was, but as Katharine spoke a chord was struck, then two or three more followed, and the first bars of a waltz rang through the room. It was the same which the orchestra had been playing on the previous evening, just when Katharine had left the Assembly rooms with Hester Crowdie.

"They were playing that last night," she said, leaning toward him once more in the shadow of the piano. "I was so unhappy — last night — "

No one was looking at them in their corner. John Ralston caught her hand in his, pressed it almost sharply, and then held it a moment.

"I love you with all my heart," he said.

The deep grey eyes melted as they met his, and the beautiful mouth quivered.

"I want to kiss you, dear," said Katharine. "Then I shall know. Do you think anybody will see? "

That is the story of those five days, from Monday afternoon to Friday evening, in reality little more than four times twenty-four hours. It has been a long story, and if it has not been well told, the fault lies with him who has told it, and may or may not be pardoned, according to the kindness of those whose patience has brought them thus far. And if there be any whose patience will carry them further, they shall be satisfied before long,

unless the writer be meanwhile gathered among those who tell no tales.

For there is much more to be said about John Ralston and Katharine, and about all the other people who have entered into their lives. For instance, it may occur to some one to wonder whether, after this last evening, John and Katharine declared their marriage at once, or whether they were obliged to keep the secret much longer, and some may ask whether John Ralston's resolution held good against more of such temptations as he had resisted on Wednesday night at the Thirlwalls' dance. Some may like to know whether old Robert Lauderdale lived many years longer, and, if he died, what became of the vast Lauderdale fortune; whether it turned out to be true that Alexander Junior was rich, or, at least, not nearly so poor as he represented himself to be; whether Walter Crowdie had another of those strange attacks which had so terrified his wife on Monday night; whether he and Paul Griggs, the veteran man of letters, were really bound by some common tie of a former history or not, and, finally, perhaps, whether Charlotte Slayback got divorced from Benjamin Slayback of Nevada, or not. There is also a pretty little tale to be told about the three Misses Miner, Frank's old-maid sisters. And some few there may be who will care to know what Katharine's convictions ultimately became

and remained, when, after passing through this five days' storm, she found time once more for thought and meditation. All these things may interest a few patient readers, but the main question here raised and not yet answered is whether that hasty, secret marriage between Katharine and John turned out to have been really such a piece of folly as it seemed, or whether the lovers were ultimately glad that they had done as they did. It is assuredly very rash to be married secretly, and some of the reasons given by Katharine when she persuaded John to take the step were not very valid ones, as he, at least, was well aware at the time. But, on the other hand, such true love as they really bore one another is good, and a rare thing in the world, and when men and women feel such love, having felt it long, and knowing it, they may be right to do such things to make sure of not being parted; and they may live to look each into the other's eyes and say, long afterwards, 'Thank God that we were not afraid.' But this must not be asserted of them positively by others without proof.

For better, or for worse, Katharine Lauderdale is Katharine Ralston, and must be left sitting behind the piano with her husband after the Van De Waters' dinner-party. And if she is the centre of any interest, or even of any idle speculation for such as have read these pages of her history,

they have not been written in vain. At all events, she has made a strange beginning in life, and almost unawares she has been near some of the evil things which lie so close to the good, at the root of all that is human. But youth does not see the bad sights in its path. Its young eyes look onward, and sometimes upward, and it passes by on the other side.

THE END.